

Mountain Man – Chapter 10 – The Big Day

After dinner, Ray and Stacy went into the living room to visit. Ryan was helping his grandmother with dishes.

“Stacy, could you drop the humor until after we’re married?” Ray asked. “Ryan has a point; you should wait until after we’re married to choke me.”

“Ok,” Stacy said, “When are you going to tell me what it was about hitting Bert that put you down so badly?”

“I used to fight, for a time, years ago,” Ray said, “And I broke a guy’s neck with an uppercut. He came out of it ok, but I don’t like to fight if I can avoid it.”

“I can understand that Ray, thanks for confiding in me,” Stacy said, “Man you sent old Bert flying.”

“Old Bert is sitting it out in county jail for 75 days according to that barber,” Ray half laughed.

“They should have given him a year,” Stacy suggested.

“Two and a half months for going on a drunk is a long time Stacy,” Ray said. “But a lot of that time is because Bert vomited on the Deputy’s back seat. The barber said that Bert couldn’t come up with the price of new seat covers.”

“Old Bert used to call me up every time another woman dumped him,” Stacy said, “I just hung up on him, but I’m glad he’s sitting it out. He deserves it.”

“He’s not going to be a problem is he?” Ray asked.

“After the way you patted him?” Stacy laughed. “No, Bert won’t be coming around anymore Ray, so you won’t have to hit him again.”

“That was a pretty nice bonus check you got,” Ray said.

“Bonus check and wedding present wrapped up all into one,” Stacy said. “It’s almost enough to buy you that stallion.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t need a fancy horse,” Ray insisted. “We’ll just get me an old nag after we get the barn built. I hope you’re a pretty good carpenter Stacy, this is going to be a lot of work.”

“Oh?” Stacy said, “How much work?”

“Well, there’s a cabin to build and a shed plus a barn,” Ray summarized.

“We’ll have Ryan to help, and Dad can supervise,” Stacy said. “Maybe Michael can give you some ideas on a barn.”

“I was hoping some of your relatives could at least help with some ideas,” Ray admitted, “I hadn’t even thought about Michael.”

“Mom said that Michael and Nancy went in with Dad and her on a wedding present,” Stacy said. “Must be something nice if it took both of them to come up with it.”

“Did she say what it was?” Ray asked.

“She clammed up pretty good when we got to that part of the discussion,” Stacy reported, “So I have no idea.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure it will be nice,” Ray said.

“We usually have Tom and Jerry’s on Christmas Eve,” Stacy said, “Let’s go see if Mom has them ready.”

Christmas Eve was the one night of the year that Stacy let Ryan consume alcohol. She had started that the year before. Ryan had appreciated his Mom treating him like a grownup and hadn’t asked for a second cup.

The family tradition was to open the Christmas presents on Christmas morning. Some families did it on Christmas Eve, but the Benton’s always waited until Christmas morning. They had a nice evening. Roy had a fire going in the fireplace and the Christmas tree was decorated especially nicely.

Stacy pointed out the ornaments that were presents for Ryan. One for each year; it was another family tradition. She also showed him all 18 of her ornaments from when she was growing up.

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Ray woke up to a house filled with the smells of Christmas. He showered, shaved, brushed his teeth and dressed in his second best. He tried to sort out the presents in his head. Today was the snow pants, boots and gift certificate. Tomorrow was the Chanel No 5 and the smaller gift certificate. Tuesday was the nightgown set. It was a good thing he’d written Christmas, Birthday and Wedding on the packages. All of the presents were wrapped in the same Christmas paper. The 4th package had a small X written on it, though he probably should have written on 3 X’s.

He took the package for Stacy, the bottle of good Bourbon he’d bought Roy and sweater Stacy had helped him pick out for Hazel and headed down stairs. Hazel had made the caramel rolls again and Ray was developing a fondness for the rolls, he hoped that

Stacy could make them. The breakfast wasn't the usual heavy duty cooking that Hazel had been doing. She was busy getting around a turkey and ham and all of those delicious salads.

Ryan was paying attention as Ray put the presents under the tree. By his count, the packages were one short. He didn't see a package for him from his grandparents either. What was going on here had everyone but his Mom forgotten to get him a Christmas present? Stacy brought Ryan a glass of milk and several caramel rolls. He took them from her because at least she had remembered to get him a Christmas present. A short time later, Roy asked if everyone was ready to open the presents.

Roy started to hand out the packages. The first was for Hazel from Ray, a sweater. The second was for Stacy from Ray, snow pants, boots and a gift certificate. The third was from Roy to Hazel, another sweater. The fourth was from Ryan to Roy, slippers. The fifth was for Ryan from Stacy, snow pants and boots. The sixth was from Stacy to Hazel, another sweater.

The seventh was from Stacy to Roy, a bottle of Bourbon. The eighth was for Roy from Ray, another bottle of Bourbon. The ninth was for Ray from Stacy, a cowboy hat. The tenth was from Hazel for Roy, a shirt. The eleventh was for Ray from Hazel, a shirt. The twelfth was from Roy to Ray, a pair of Wranglers. The thirteenth was from Roy and Hazel to Stacy, jeans and a shirt. The fourteenth was from Ryan to Hazel, a sweater. The fifteenth was for Ray from Ryan, a shirt. The sixteenth was from Ryan to Stacy, a blouse.

"I guess that's the last of the packages," Roy said. "Oh wait a minute, didn't we have something for Ryan, Hazel?"

"I don't know, Roy," Hazel asked, "Did we?"

"Oh, I remember," Roy said, "it's in the gun safe."

Ryan's eyes got large at the mention of the gun safe. Roy opened the safe and took out a box, which he handed to Ryan. Ryan opened the box.

"Wow! A rifle. Thanks Grandpa. Thanks grandma," he said.

"Roy, could you look in the safe again," Ray teased, "See if there is another package for Ryan."

"There's this box here," Roy said, "Could this be it?"

"Give it to Ryan and let him check," Ray suggested.

Roy handed the box containing the Remington to his grandson. Ryan's eyes got even bigger when he opened the box and saw the Remington rifle.

“We’ll give you ammunition next Christmas, Ryan,” Roy kidded.

Ryan was speechless. Maybe he didn’t get a lot of presents, but the presents he got were something else. Two rifles. Wow! A fancy stainless steel .22 and a 7.62x51mm Remington exactly like the one he wanted. He would remember this Christmas for a long time.

“Gee, Ray,” Ryan finally managed, “This is just the rifle I wanted. Thank you.”

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“Did you see the look on Ryan’s face?” Ray asked Stacy.

“I’m going to have to speak to Dad about the way he teased Ryan,” Stacy said. “He was a little mean, I think.”

“Stacy, a boy’s first rifle is very memorable,” Ray said. “I think Roy was just stretching it out to make the memory last.”

“When did you get your first rifle?” Stacy asked.

“In boot camp,” Ray said, “It was a M14.”

“I thought that they used the M16 in Vietnam,” Stacy said.

“The Army adopted the M16 in 1963 and the M16A1 in 1967, then the A2 in 1982. The A3 came out in 1994, just before I retired,” Ray explained. “Personally, I prefer the civilian version of the M14, the M1A.”

“Stacy, will you peel the potatoes?” Hazel called from the kitchen.

“Be right there Mom,” Stacy answered. “Duty calls.”

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Ray joined Roy who was showing Ryan the ins and outs of his two new rifles.

“When can I shoot them?” Ryan asked.

“How about you bring them with you when you come out the first Friday after school starts?” Ray suggested.

“Aw, do I have to wait so long?” Ryan griped.

"I'm afraid so Ryan," Ray said, "Tomorrow is your mother's birthday and the wedding is Tuesday.

"Well, ok," Ryan said, the disappointment obvious in his voice.

"I have plenty of ammunition Ryan, so you'll be able to shoot all that you want," Ray said to console Ryan.

"Ok," Ryan said and put the guns back in his grandfather's gun safe.

"Ray, if you want to," Roy suggested, "I suppose we could run out to your cabin Monday while Stacy is getting her hair and nails done."

"Sure Roy, let's do that," Ray said, "You tell Ryan you talked me into it."

"Why don't you tell him?" Roy asked.

"Roy, I really like Ryan, but I don't want him to think I'm a soft touch," Ray said. "I'd do anything for him, but we've only known each other a short time. Let him have time to build the friendship at his own pace. If I just cave in, he might think that I'm trying to buy his friendship."

"I guess that makes sense in a way," Roy said. "Ok, I'll tell him after Christmas Dinner that I talked you into it."

"What kind of plot are you two hatching up?" Stacy asked walking in from the kitchen.

"We're going to take Ryan out to the cabin on Monday while you're getting your nails and hair done so he can shoot those new rifles," Ray said. "Roy is going to tell him he talked me into it."

"Don't want him to think you're trying to buy his affection, huh?" Stacy said.

Ray turned to Roy and asked, "Roy, where does she get this from?"

"Her mother I expect," Roy laughed, "I could never put one over on Hazel."

"Men," Stacy laughed, "Dinner will be ready in about 45 minutes. We'll eat at 1 o'clock."

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Even though the Christmas Dinner didn't have a Prime Rib Roast, it was better than Thanksgiving Dinner, if that were possible. Hazel had omitted the roast this year because she didn't have room for the leftovers and there were all of those things for the reception.

The wedding was to be in the Church, but only family was invited. Ray had called Scott and asked him to be his best man, but Scott had a commitment that he could not get out of. Scott promised that Susan and he would come up in the spring to meet Stacy. Ray then asked Michael to be his best man on the day they moved Stacy's things to the storage locker. Ray apologized for the short notice and explained about Scott.

Michael said he'd be honored to be Ray's best man. Michael had told Ray that since his wife Nancy was going to be Stacy's bridesmaid, this would work out very well. With only family being invited, that meant that the wedding party would consist of Stacy, Ray, Ryan, Roy, Hazel, Michael and Nancy plus the minister and his wife. Michael and Nancy's children were excluded. All of the rest of Stacy's family lived on the west coast and couldn't make it to Jackson halfway between Christmas and New Year's.

Stacy had called Ryan's parents and told them that she was finally getting remarried and they were certainly most welcome. They told her they would like to attend but simply couldn't make it. She wouldn't be too upset with them they hoped. They asked all about Ray and Stacy got the distinct impression that they approved of her choice even without meeting him.

Ryan's father was a retired Army Master Sergeant. Ryan Jr. would be the first member of the family to be a commissioned officer she told them. Ryan had announced that he intended to go to West Point.

She also tearfully shared the real circumstances of Ryan's death. They had wanted to know how she'd found out and Stacy explained that by an odd coincidence her husband to be had been there when Ryan had died and had told her it was the bravest thing he'd ever seen in 30-years of being in the Army.

David and Rose Williams said that they would do their best to get up to Jackson in the spring. They wanted to see Ryan Jr. and meet this new husband of hers. Just before they hung up David told her there would be a little something in the mail for her and Ray along with a letter of explanation.

What they didn't tell her was that Ryan Sr. had an insurance policy with his mother as beneficiary. Before he'd left for Iraq, Ryan had instructed his parents to give the money to Stacy and her new husband if she remarried. Otherwise, the money was to go to Ryan for his education. David and Rose knew about the pending military academy appointment so they intended that Stacy and Ray should have the policy proceeds and the considerable interest they had earned since 1992.

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When his grandfather told Ryan that he'd talked Ray into going shooting on Monday, Ryan was extremely enthusiastic. He thanked his grandfather and then Ray. Boy, he wouldn't have to wait until January 8th. Ray had a surprise of his own for Ryan. The gun storeowner didn't have the scope in stock for the Remington that Ray had wanted to put

on it. He had ordered it and told Ray it might be in by Christmas. Ray intended to check with the store Monday morning. If the scope had come in, they would stop by and pick it up. Otherwise, he would just leave it unmentioned.

They had plenty of leftovers and Stacy and Hazel prepared turkey and ham club sandwiches for supper to accompany the left over salads. Ray couldn't remember eating like Ryan did when he was Ryan's age, but that had been a long time ago. Ray decided that if Stacy didn't eat more a good stiff wind would blow her away. He tried to drop a subtle hint, but Stacy just ignored him. She intended to maintain the 20-something figure as long as she could. It was getting harder to do every year.

Before long she probably get old and fat and slip up to 130 pounds or, heaven forbid, 135. Stacy was getting to know Ray better with each passing day. She approved of his decision to let Ryan build the friendship at his own pace. From what she could see, Ray had given the matter a lot of thought.

If anything bothered her about Ray, it was his insight. It was almost as if he had a crystal ball. If Ray said the tech stock boom was over, she believed that it was or soon would be. If Ray had a sinking feeling down deep inside the someday in the not too distant future TEOTWAWKI would occur, she had no doubt that he was correct. She just hoped that they had plenty of time to get ready.

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Since Stacy intended to go shopping for the Day-after-Christmas sales on Sunday afternoon, they gave her her birthday gifts Sunday morning. Ryan had gotten his mother a scarf to go with her new parka. Her mother and father had announced that her birthday gift this year was being combined with her wedding gift. It seemed strange, but ok.

Ray had given her a bottle of Spray Chanel No 5 cologne and a gift certificate for the same store. Obviously he'd seen the bottle that she'd kept on her dresser. It had been a gift from Ryan on her birthday before he left for Iraq. She was glad that Ray hadn't diminished the gift by buying her the same thing. Even cheapskates get lucky. At \$250 for a 3.4oz bottle, Ray couldn't see it. And when Stacy confided the history of the bottle, Ray decided that being a cheapskate had paid off handsomely this time.

Roy mentioned that the gun store might be open Sunday afternoon. Ray gave them a call and they were open and the scope was in. He left Ryan with Roy and went to the gun store for the Leopold VX-I 4-12x40mm scope and rings. The scope was an especially fine model, and Ryan should get years of service from it.

He'd taken Ryan's new rifle with him and hoped he could get the scope mounted and the rifle back in the gun safe without Ryan being any the wiser. Ryan's eyes should go from saucer to dinner plate size when he saw that scope. Ray succeeded and he couldn't wait to see Ryan's expression Monday morning.

Stacy and Hazel didn't get back until 5:30. Stacy had several bags so she must have gotten some good out of those gift certificates. Hazel had exchanged 3 of the sweaters and gotten herself some things she really wanted. Did everyone have to give grandma a sweater?

The guys were half starved and the women were amazed that they couldn't open the refrigerator door and make a sandwich. That's what they got anyway, turkey or ham sandwiches. Well at least the guys had managed to find a can of beer to watch the game with. More than one if the empty space in the refrigerator was any guide. Ryan must have been hungry too because the caramel rolls were all gone.

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Being cooped up in a house with Stacy for three nights running and having his own bedroom was wearing on Ray. Only one more night of forced separation had to be endured. Ray didn't expect Roy would mind one bit, but since Hazel had seen fit to give him a separate room he didn't intend to start off on his new mother in law's bad side. Ray didn't know about mother in laws, but he'd gotten an earful over the years. That had been enough for him. He seemed to be in Hazel's good graces and that was the way he wanted to keep it.

Monday morning Stacy was out of the house early. Her hair appointment was for 9am and her nail appointment for 1pm. Ray had no idea what Stacy needed to do to her hair, it looked fine to him, but if she wanted to get her hair done, he wasn't going to get on her bad side either.

Ray had picked up a brick of .22LR cartridges at the gun store and had them in the pickup's glove box. They left the guns in the boxes and headed for the cabin. When they arrived, the first thing that Ray did was to let Promise out to run. She remarked her territory and then followed them as they drove the snowmobiles over to the range. It wasn't far, but it beat wading snow. He'd grabbed 100 rounds of 7.62x51mm match ammo from his gun cabinet and had the brick of .22's in his pocket.

"Which one do you want to shoot first Ryan?" Ray asked.

"The .22," Ryan answered.

Ray marched out 100' and set a target. That was far enough for open sights on a new rifle. When he got back, he hand Ryan the brick of .22's.

"You don't have to shoot up the whole brick today Ryan," Ray counseled.

"I won't," Ryan said. Ryan took out 2 boxes of the .22LR cartridges and loaded the rotary magazine. He started right in burning up the shells and by the time he had gone through both boxes was shooting pretty fair with the new Ruger.

Ray drove the snowmobile out and put up a 6" bull at 100-yards. When he got back, he handed Ryan the five boxes of match ammo. Ryan hadn't taken the Remington out of the box; he was clearly enamored with the Ruger. When he opened the box to remove the Remington his eyes all but popped out of his head.

"You guys," Ryan managed to get out. Ray helped Ryan get the rifle sighted in. The gun storeowner had done a reasonable job of bore sighting the scope and the adjustments were moderate. By the time Ryan was on the second box of match cartridges, he was shooting a fair group.

The last 5 shot group came in at 3". They drove back to the cabin, got Promise settled and left to go back to town. Ray and Roy teased Ryan all the way back to Jackson, calling him deadeye. Ryan was at that age where a little teasing went a long way. In desperation, he'd finally said, "You've got that right." For some reason the men quit kidding him after that.

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No one bothered to hold to the thing about the groom not seeing the bride in her wedding dress because Stacy wasn't walking down the aisle. The Burgundy dress was satin like in appearance and was positively a perfect fit, accenting her every attribute. Michael and Nancy arrived around 10:30 and they left for the church. The Minister signed all of the papers and they went to the chapel for the ceremony.

Hazel had a disposable camera that would be the extent of the wedding pictures. Somehow all of the men managed to have on a blue Blazer and tan slacks. Different shades of tan, but tan. Stacy could take your breath away in her Burgundy dress. Michael had told Nancy that Stacy was wearing burgundy and Nancy came up with a new dress that matched in color though not in style.

The Minister's wife played a tolerable rendition of "I Love You Truly" and the Minister followed the canned ceremony. They made the promises; exchanged rings and Ray kissed his new bride. He slipped the Minister his \$100 and they returned to Roy and Hazel's. They had time for a quick bite to eat before the reception.

The reception had been announced in the Jackson Hole Star Tribune and a lot of people who Stacy knew from around town and from the market showed up. Bill had suspected that a lot of his customers would be there and though he couldn't be, he sent over a huge assortment of cold cuts, sliced cheeses and breads. Considering it was a weekday, the turnout was fairly respectable. Probably all of the town gossips wanting to see whom Stacy had hooked, or vice versa.

The second highlight of the day came after the reception when they opened the gifts. There was an envelope marked Ray and Stacy and Stacy recognized her mother's handwriting. In the envelope was a photo of the stallion with a note on the back that said

congratulations from Roy and Hazel, Michael and Nancy. Stacy looked at Michael in disbelief.

“I’ll board him with your other two horses until you get a barn up,” Michael said.

That earned all four of the gift givers a wet and sloppy from Stacy and a hug or grip from Ray.

The next envelope look suspiciously like Ryan’s handwriting and it contained a card with appropriate sentiments and Ryan’s scrawled, ‘I love you both’. Perhaps that was the real highlight. The envelope from David and Rose contained a cashier’s check for \$16,680.07 together with a letter that said that the check represented the proceeds of a \$10,000 life insurance policy that Ryan had instructed be distributed to Stacy if she re-married plus interest at 8% compounded monthly for 6½ years.

Stacy and her new husband were to use the money as they saw fit. That was a show-stopper. No more presents were opened that day. The envelope also contained a smaller envelope in Ryan’s handwriting that said Stacy. Stacy took the envelope to the kitchen to read alone. The note inside the envelope was in Ryan’s handwriting.

“Stacy,

I’m sorry that I didn’t get back. I know the new man must be one hell of a guy if you picked him; I’ll bet he is retired Army. Money can’t buy happiness, but you already have that, finally. We never got that shelter built so this money is for the storm. Use it wisely.

All my love,

Ryan”

Ryan’s voice from the grave brought forth a flood of emotions. Stacy stood there for the longest time, thinking of Ryan. Finally she slipped the note back in the envelope and returned to the living room. She slipped the check, letter and envelope into the envelope they came in.

“Ray and I will open the rest of these presents when we get home,” Stacy said softly. “I’m going to get changed.”

“Are you ok Mom?” Ryan asked, concerned.

Stacy gave Ryan that secret little smile that said she was and left to change. Ray went to his room and got his bag. Stacy’s bags were sitting in the hall, so he took them and his to the Ford. Stacy came out a few minutes later dressed in a nice slacks outfit and they left for the cabin. She hugged everyone, thanked him or her and left.

Ray never uttered a single word. He half suspected what this was all about, but he wasn't about to intrude. He took the remaining presents to the truck with Michael, Roy and Ryan's help and they left. They were halfway to the cabin when Stacy finally spoke.

"Ray, it's almost like Ryan knew you would be the man in my life," Stacy said. "Maybe not you individually, but someone just like you. He said, *We never got that shelter built so this money is for the storm*. I'm not sure I know what to do with the money Ray."

"You have a savings account for Ryan don't you?" Ray asked.

"Yes, but he probably won't need the money if he goes to West Point," Stacy replied, unsure of Ray's point.

"You could put the money in that account for a rainy day, Stacy," Ray suggested. "If for some reason you needed it, you could always take it out."

"Rainy Day and Storm could mean the same thing Stacy," Ray added.

"I guess you're right," Stacy said. "We'll put it up until we need it."

Promise was happy to see Ray, but even happier to see Stacy. She must have sensed something was different because she stuck to Stacy like glue. Ray let Promise out for a few minutes and she came back in and curled up by the fire. He put on a pot of coffee. Since he didn't have a sofa, Ray slid the two easy chairs together and got the fireplace burning.

Ray sensed, rather than knew, that when Stacy was ready she would lead him by the hand. He was surprised that she asked for a glass of Merlot. He slid the coffee off the heat and poured them a glass of wine. They toasted each other and she took him by the hand and led him to HER bed. He gave her the final present, a box with a little filmy thing made out of sheer material. Hmm, she would get to wear white after all.

Mountain Man – Chapter 11 – Honeymoon

Ray had brought the presents in the evening before while the coffee was brewing and had stacked them in a corner. There weren't many empty corners in the cabin so it had been a challenge just to find a place to put them. They had talked it over and had decided that they didn't need to spend the money on going somewhere away from Jackson for a formal honeymoon.

In the first place, the cabin was almost 30 miles from town, how much further did they need to go? In the second place what was a honeymoon all about anyway? They were alone, 30 miles from anywhere and Promise didn't seem to be too interested in their antics.

The first full day of their new marriage, Ray had gotten up, let Promise out, used the bathroom, fired up the woodstove and put on a pot of coffee. Then, he had had his cup of coffee and started in on his exercises. Stacy awoke to find him in the middle of his sit-ups. She used the bathroom, let Promise back in, had a sip or two of coffee and joined him. She decided to do her abbreviated 20-minute routine since Ray was so far along with his exercising.

Stacy finished up first and slipped into the shower. She hadn't bothered with the curtain this morning, Ryan wasn't there, Promise didn't care and Ray was more than familiar with her bod. She was just finishing up when Ray slipped into the shower and washed her back. With that she was done and she got out before things went too far. She was hungry, for food.

Ray didn't have one of those finely chiseled bodies like one saw on TV, but there wasn't an ounce of flab on him either. It was now obvious to Stacy how he managed to keep in shape during the winter months. It was equally obvious to Ray how Stacy managed to keep that 20-something figure. They were learning about each other just like people did on a honeymoon.

Ray offered to fix breakfast and Stacy told him an egg and slice of toast would be just fine with her. Ray had finally concluded that Stacy ate, but she didn't over eat. At first those small portions had bothered him, but when he'd added them up in his head, he'd figured out that she had plenty of food on her plate.

They had disposed of the issue of the wedding present from Ryan Sr., and would make a run into Jackson and deposit the check in Ryan's College Fund, a Money Market account, before the weekend. Stacy told Ray that the Lodge did quite a New Year's party and he called and made reservations for dinner and the party.

Stacy had never been separated from Ryan for more than a few days at a time in his entire 13 years and she found a minute to miss her son. As much as they didn't want to start in on the Wedding Gifts, they had to do it so they could send Thank You cards.

They opened the gifts; most were practical, but who needed 3 can openers? The sets of sheets could be exchanged for Twin or Queen size, the extra everything could be returned and converted into something they didn't have and the fancy silver stuff could be stored.

Stacy told Ray that her uncle, the one who had left her the two fillies was Michael's father. There was a room full of tack at the ranch and she was pretty sure that Michael would sell them a good used saddle and bridle for the stallion. She couldn't get over that gift.

Although it was to both of them, the stallion was clearly intended for Ray. One of Michael's boys rode the horse on a regular basis and he was a fine animal; a little frisky in the spring, but he soon settled down. They could raise a fine bunch of purebred Arabian horses. They wouldn't necessarily be show horses, but they would be fine stock.

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They spent the morning opening the gifts, signing the Thank You cards and looking up the addresses in the phone book. With that chore out of the way, they had a light lunch and spent some of the early afternoon playfully and making love.

Fortunately, the little hot water heater had recovered and they squeezed into the small shower stall together. One thing led to another and they ended up getting 3 showers that day. New Year's Eve was Friday night and Stacy suggested that they drive back into Jackson on Thursday, exchange the gifts, get a motel room and if they had time, drive out to Michael's to look at the stallion and talk to him about the saddle.

Ray had asked the locker plant to cut the New York Strips at 10oz., two per package so he fished around in the freezer and found two of the steaks. Each steak was individually wrapped in plastic and if they needed 3 for when Ryan visited, they could open a second package and take out a third steak. He grabbed a can of button mushrooms and a couple of medium sized potatoes to complete the meal. He checked the gauge on the propane bottle for the space heater and it was good until next week.

He put the steaks on the counter to thaw and dragged in firewood to restock the wood boxes. It was just another day. Yeah right. How had he gotten so lucky? You could pretty much tell Stacy's age if you examined around her eyes, but from a distance, she could pass for a woman in her late 20's. She certainly had the energy of a 30-year-old woman.

Ray also made a note to buy some more of the Merlot. They didn't drink any more than a glass apiece, but even so, he didn't have that much on hand. He'd better get another bottle of Bourbon; Roy liked a couple of fingers of Bourbon according to Stacy. They spent some time on the net and reviewed Ray's plans for the new cabin. Stacy suggested that he consider steam or hot water heat and put the boiler in the shelter. Made sense to him. The new cabin would have a steeply pitched roof because of the snowfall.

In the Jackson Hole area, the snowfall could range from about 90 inches to as much as 400 inches and it was localized. Ray's 40-acres seemed to be in one of the heavier snowfall locales.

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Thursday morning they got up, did their exercises, ate breakfast, took Promise out for a run and loaded the exchange gifts into the Ford. Roy called ahead and made a reservation for 2 nights at the motel. They set off around noon for Jackson.

They mailed the Thank You cards and made short work of the gift exchanging. They unloaded the new gifts into the motel room and headed for Roy and Hazel's. Ryan was really glad to see them. Had he almost slipped and called Ray Dad? Probably not, but still...

They had dinner with Stacy's folks. Stacy talked about the gift exchanges and the new things they'd traded for with Hazel and Ray and Roy sipped 2 fingers of Roy's Christmas present.

The next day, Ray wanted to go to the gun store and get Ryan cases for the rifles. Roy said he wanted to go along and get Ryan a scope for the Ruger. Besides, if he went along, they could get his discount.

Stacy and Ray also wanted to get out to Michael's and get a saddle and tack and there was that check to deposit. They also wanted to stop at the bank and add Stacy's signature to Ray's account and Ray's signature to Stacy's account. They would have a full day ahead of them on Friday.

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Friday morning they got the banking chores out of the way, Stacy changed her driver's license to her married name and they went to pick up Ryan and Roy at her folks. While the 3 men went to the gun store, Hazel and Stacy engaged in girl talk.

At the gun store, they opted for hard shell cases for Ryan's rifles and Roy got him a sling for the Remington and a pretty fancy scope for the Ruger. Roy made some negative comment about those cheap little .22 scopes that most people put on .22's and bought Ryan a much better scope.

He selected a Leopold Rifleman 3-9x40mm for the Ruger, more for the objective size than anything else. The rifle was a \$600 rifle and putting a scope that cost under \$200 wasn't too great an extravagance.

Ray got Ryan a 500-round case of Black Hills Match 7.62x51mm ammo, a couple of bricks of .22LR and two extra magazines for the Ruger. Who said that Ray wasn't spoiling Ryan? Roy wasn't much better, if the truth were known. Roy told the storeowner that

Ray should be getting the same discount he was; after all, he was a member of the family now.

They had lunch at Hazel and Roy's and after lunch Ray, Stacy and Ryan drove to Michael's ranch. In the flesh, the Arabian stallion was quite the sight. He had good lines and stood about 15 hands to the shoulder. Michael showed them the tack that he generally used on the stallion. The saddle was plain, but of good quality. It had seen some use, but a little saddle soap and it would look almost new.

Stacy and Michael worked out a price and she wrote him a check. Nancy had coffee and a coffee cake and they sat around the kitchen table visiting. Michael suggested that Ray go for a precut barn and suggested a size. He told Ray that their two boys, Michael, Jr. and Bill would give anything to get off the ranch for the summer and could help with the cabin, shed and barn. That worked out pretty good. The boys were 16 and 17 and Michael assured Ray they were hard workers.

They had to get Ryan back to Roy and Hazel's and get ready for dinner at the Lodge. The only dinner reservation available had been for 9pm and Ray had taken it. They dropped Ryan off at Stacy's folks and headed for the motel. They had 4 hours until their dinner reservation and they were on their honeymoon, after all.

They ended up having to hurry a bit to get to the Lodge on time for their reservation. They had a moderate dinner, the 7oz. and 9oz. filets with a salad and baked potatoes and danced in the New Year. Ray wasn't 19 anymore and he'd danced more since he'd met Stacy than he had in his entire life. He was more than ready to return to the motel and turn in.

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New Year's Day they checked out of the motel and went to Roy and Hazel's. They had a light lunch and Hazel and Stacy visited while Roy, Ray and Ryan watched some of the games. Around 4pm, they announced that they were heading back to the cabin. They were tired and there was the dog to consider. They told Ryan they would see him next weekend and left.

They got back to the cabin just before dark. Promise did her romp outside and settled in front of the fire. Ray checked the forecast on the Weather Channel and it looked like they were in for a blow. They fetched extra firewood from the far stack and settled in front of the fire to enjoy their books.

The next morning they awoke to the sound of the wind. It was snowing steadily, but the wind was down so it didn't qualify as a blizzard. They did their exercises, showered, had breakfast and stayed at the table to discuss the building plans.

The shelter would house a boiler, the hot water heater and Stacy said to just put the washing machine in there and save on two sets of plumbing. Maybe, she said, after

everything was built, they should think about an automatic washer and dryer. Mrs. Jenkins would probably give Ray most of his money back on the washing machine and rinse tubs, because Stacy had heard that Mrs. Jenkins had been trapped into selling them by setting the price too low.

Stacy also suggested that they pour a slab over both halves of the basement and leave a crawl space under the cabin. Michael had told Ray what size of barn to build and had made allowances for up to six horses, six cattle and the chickens. He had also suggested that Ray consider some of that thin film stuff for the barn roof. They would have electricity to burn if he did that.

It snowed for most of the week and it looked like Ryan wouldn't be able to come out for the weekend. Stacy talked to him on the phone every other day and he told her it wasn't snowing hardly at all in Jackson. His grandfather and he would go out to Uncle Michael's so he could shoot his .22 and he would see them the following weekend, weather permitting.

Over the course of the week, they went on the net to look at barns. Ray discovered that he could get a precut barn just a little bigger than he'd planned on from one company with a website. The company was running a sale and as long as you ordered and paid for the barn by April 15th, you could get a substantial discount on the building. They also had precut sheds and if you bought a shed with the barn, you got the same discount.

Ray told Stacy that he'd have to forego the discount; he hadn't planned on cashing in his investment until between May 15th and May 31st. Stacy said it sounded like it qualified as a rainy day situation to her. They could buy the precut shed and barn with money from the Money Market account and Ray could replace the money when he settled his sale.

They also looked at log homes on the net. They found a model they really liked and the company would assemble the home for you. There was a 60-day lead-time and the home took about two weeks to assemble. They discussed that at length and the deciding factor came down to the R-values of the home.

It exceeded what Ray had intended to build and they could get it with various stages of interior construction. You could also send them a floor plan and their engineers would adapt one of their floor plans to meet your specifications.

It sounded like a deal to them. They would just have to get to Jackson and fax the sketch Ray and Stacy had agreed on. The only input Stacy had was on the kitchen. She wanted a propane fueled countertop and oven with plenty of counter and cabinet space. The kitchen was to be her domain, so Ray readily agreed. They picked out a kitchen plan from the website and noted it on the drawing.

They weren't able to get to Jackson until Friday, January 14th. Ray faxed off the plans to the homebuilder and gave them their phone number in case there were any ques-

tions. They picked up Ryan and headed back to the cabin. January 15th was a nice day and Stacy, Ray and Ryan had a good session on the range.

Ryan was getting the feel of the new Remington and his shooting had improved considerably. He was now consistently shooting under a 2" group at 100-yards. Remington claimed that the rifle could shoot MOA groups, but Ray had his doubts.

Sunday came all too soon and they took Ryan back to Jackson to Stacy's folks. They talked about it at length and decided that Ryan would only come to the cabin every other week. It had been Ryan's idea; he had a lot of school projects coming up this semester.

And, if the truth were told, Ryan was growing up and they didn't spend so much time doing the Mom/son stuff that they had done when Stacy was a single parent. They still spent time together, quality time, but Ryan seemed more interested in shooting, homework and the computer than on playing Monopoly. Ray told Stacy that it was perfectly normal; Ryan was very slowly cutting the apron strings. She and Ryan would always be close because she had raised him as a single parent, but he was growing up.

They got a call from the homebuilder with some questions. They answered them the best they could and the builder gave them an account number and a password. Their home plans would be available to view on the website in a few weeks, just one of the extra services provided by the homebuilder.

The builder suggested that with the steeply pitched roof, they build a spare bedroom in the area over their bedroom and also use the other half of the space for storage or a computer room or something. They could put a dormer in the upstairs bedroom. The builder could put a ½ bath on the second floor very economically. The plans on the website would show them their alternatives and the costs of each option.

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Roy and Hazel brought Ryan out for the first time on Friday, January 28th. They marveled at the compactness of the cabin (they thought it was cramped) and at all of the modern conveniences (Hazel wouldn't have gone to the shed to wash for anything). Had Stacy lost weight? Was she getting enough to eat? My, that homemade bread of Ray's sure was good. Why thank you Ray, I'll have a couple of fingers, now that you offer.

It was the usual parental visit, but Stacy seemed to glow. It appeared that the new marriage was working out well. Hadn't had a fight yet? It had been a whole month. Every couple had their little disputes. Roy and Hazel stayed until 7pm and headed back to Jackson. They would see them all on Sunday; could they make it for Sunday dinner?

To tell the truth, Hazel was just missing Stacy a little bit. She had had to adjust when Stacy married Ryan, but then having Stacy and Ryan Jr. back in Jackson had undone the independence a little bit. Hazel would just have to adjust again.

“Ray, you have an email here,” Ryan announced.

Ray checked the email and it was from the homebuilder. Their design was fairly straightforward and the plans were on the website. Ray dug out the password and they looked at the plans. Pretty nice, they thought. They had until June 1st to order the home or pay the design fee. The design fee was included if they ordered the home anytime during a 1-year period. Ray didn't have paper for his Epson printer so they would print out the plans when they got to Roy and Hazel's on Sunday.

“What are these extra rooms for?” Ryan asked.

“Well, Ryan the one over your bedroom in the front is a computer room and the other is a guest bedroom. For your grandparent's or maybe a girlfriend to stay over some day,” Stacy replied. Hazel had confided to Stacy that Ryan was paying a little bit of attention to a girl in his class named Jennie. They weren't close to the dating stage yet, but they studied together. Jennie was a pert little brunette and smart as all get out. Whoa, Ryan was growing up.

“Mom, could I have my back allowances?” Ryan asked.

“Ryan you always got an allowance for doing chores,” Stacy had teased. “You're not doing chores for me any more so I don't know. Besides, what would you need money for?”

“You know Mom, stuff,” Ryan answered.

“What kind of stuff Ryan?” Stacy asked.

“A box of candy, ok?” Ryan replied sharply. “Valentine's is coming up.”

“But Ryan, you know I don't eat candy,” Stacy continued to tease.

“Who said it was for you, Mom?” Ryan answered.

Stacy gave her mother \$100 for Ryan to be used for allowances at \$5 per week. If Ryan did chores, Hazel could give him more. Hazel insisted that Roy and she could take care of any allowances, but Stacy pressed. Ryan was her son and she would pay the allowances.

Besides she told her mother, with Ryan only coming out every other week, they weren't being eaten out of house and home. It was enough, Stacy said, that the two of them fed Ryan and gave him a room. Stacy also gave Ryan \$40 for 'back allowances'.

Ray printed out the home plans and showed them to Roy first. Roy was impressed with the plans and asked Ray how they were going to finance the home.

“Roy, I have a pretty good investment portfolio and I’m going to cash it out and build the home, shed and barn,” Ray explained. “I can pay cash for everything and have plenty of money left over to reinvest.”

“Really?” Roy said, “I didn’t realize that you had anything besides your Army pension.”

“After I started night school,” Ray said, “I made it a point to live on a buck Sergeant’s pay. I managed to put away a pretty tidy nest egg. I think the tech market has about made its run and I’m going to cash out and build the home and out buildings. Whatever is left over will be invested in something a little more conservative right here in Jackson, maybe a Money Market account.”

“You mean to tell me that you can build everything and still have money left over?” Roy asked, “I don’t mean to be nosey, but how big is your portfolio?”

“Big enough so we’ll never have to spend the money Ryan left Stacy,” Ray said. “We’re going to borrow some of it to pay for the barn and shed, we can get one heck of a discount by paying early, but I’ll put that money back first before I spend a dime of my investment proceeds.”

Ray had just gone up about 2 or 3 notches in Roy’s eyes. He could provide for Stacy, come what may and he wasn’t open mouthed about what he had. And, Roy hadn’t realized that Ray was a college man, Stacy had never said a word about it.

“How much college did you pick up in the Army Ray, if you don’t mind my asking?” Roy asked.

“BA in Business and Economics and an MBA,” Ray answered.

“I didn’t realize.” Roy said.

“It’s not important Roy, those pieces of paper and a dollar won’t get you a cup of coffee at a Holiday Inn,” Ray responded.

“Still...” Roy said.

Hazel had been sharing with Roy how happy Stacy was with Ray. Ray was kind, considerate and above all, a fair man. He treated their daughter like an equal in every way and never asked her to do anything he wouldn’t do himself. He even baked the bread, for crying out loud. The only thing Hazel couldn’t figure out was how they managed to stay in such good of physical condition and so trim considering what a good cook Stacy was and what wonderful bread Ray baked.

o

Ryan visited every other weekend until school was out for the summer. Ray and Stacy fell into a routine during the winter months of doing their exercise, eating sensibly, walking 3 times a week if the weather permitted and shooting twice a week. Stacy was a dead shot with the M9 and was getting to be a really good shot with the two 7.62x51mm rifles. She really shone when it came to the M16A3 and she could shoot circles around Ray with the Assault Rifle.

They had to make more than one trip to town to pick up additional ammo. On one of the trips, the store had a used Winchester in .357 and Ray bought it for Stacy. Another time they had a good used SAA in .357 and he made it a matched set. That gave him another caliber to stock ammo in, but it was no big deal. Stacy got to be pretty handy with the Winchester and Colt and shot hers every bit as well as he shot his .45's. The two of them were inseparable, yet respected each other's space. The marriage was working out well.

One of the really surprising things about the marriage was that they didn't fight. That didn't mean that they didn't irritate each other from time to time, but that they were able to sit down and discuss whatever the issue was before it turned into a fight. Neither was overly demanding of the other and they made allowances for each other. Stacy because she had married once before knew when to push and when to give.

Ray didn't have that experience to draw on, but he'd found the perfect woman and he wasn't about to drive her away. There were times when one had to stand up for oneself and they did that. But whenever it raised an issue, they talked it out. Ray was realizing that Stacy was a very independent woman, just as he was a very independent man. It gave them the basis for a mutual respect. Besides, she could outshoot him.

They took the money out of the Money Market account and paid for the barn and shed. It must have been a slow spring; the company even threw in the shipping if they paid by cashier's check. The investments sold for far more than Ray thought they would and though it meant more taxes, it also meant more money. They ordered the home and paid for it after putting the money back in Stacy's Money Market account. Stacy and Ray both added Ryan as a signatory to their individual Money Market accounts but didn't add each other. They both had their own kiss my behind money in case of an emergency.

Ryan moved to the cabin when school let out. Michael Jr. and Bill were pretty handy with a hammer and by the end of July the shed and barn erected. Ray hired an electrician to wire the PV film roofs. Michael took Ray to a livestock auction and he bought two milk cows and two feeder calves. They would breed the cows and grow their own supply of beef from now on.

They moved the 3 Arabians to the cabin as soon as the barn was finished and got to riding some. Ryan was 14 now. Ray had given him a brand new Winchester in .357 for

his birthday. By now, Ryan was one hell of a good shot. He consistently shot MOA groups or better and they had moved the target out to 500-yards. Even with his own Remington Ryan was the match of Ray with a rifle and when Ryan shot Ray's M-24, it was almost embarrassing. The boy must have grown 6" over the summer.

They spent the latter half of August locating and hauling firewood. They didn't need nearly as much now with the propane fueled hot water heating system, but there was still a big fireplace to feed. Ray wanted to make sure that they had plenty of wood in case they ran out of propane. He had his 5 25-gallon bottles for emergency backup and had bought a used 22 thousand gallon tank. Even with the furnace going, the hot water heater going, the 12kw generator running and cooking, they could go for many moons if the tank were full. Ray ordered 3,000 gallons each month and the tank was slowly filling.

The barn was located down where the old cabin had set. It had its own well and electricity, thanks to the thin film roof covering. They dug a new well up by the cabin, it had only cost a little more than it would have cost to cut a trench and run the water lines to the new cabin. They tore down the old cabin and shed and stacked the lumber.

There was still plenty of life left in the old lumber and a market seemed to be developing in used lumber. The solar water heating arrangement on the shed provided plenty of hot water during the summer months, but the jury was out on how well it would work during the winter months. By the end of October, they had taken delivery of 15 thousand gallons of propane and told the dealer they would resume deliveries in the spring.

Ryan had moved back to town at the beginning of the school year. He wanted to concentrate on his studies and there was that Jennie that he was fond of. Ray and Stacy spent most of September working together, shoulder-to-shoulder gathering firewood.

They still took their two afternoons a week to shoot; they had no intention of getting rusty, and spent the mornings of the same days riding. It had taken Ray a bit of time to get used to the stallion; he was a handful of horse. Both of the mares had been bred, so they were going to have two new calves and two new foals to expand the herd.

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Ray's gun collection also included two of the Loaded M1A's with synthetic stocks and stainless barrels. These were his utility weapons, while the M-21 and the M-24 were strictly sniper weapons. Ray watched the sales and from time to time was able to pick up large quantities of surplus 7.62x51mm and 5.56x45mm ammo. He also added extra cases of the full power .45 Colt; it never seemed to go on sale, and the .357 magnum.

In the shotgun department, Ray had a Remington 870 with the 20" barrel and magazine extension with an improved cylinder choke. He also had a Remington Express 870 Combo and an extra magazine extension for when the shorter barrel was mounted. He

had added a 20-gauge Express 870 Combo for Stacy. She was a far better wing shot than he.

Ray had a contractor put in a new septic system for the new cabin. The old system was too far away and too high to properly drain the deeper than normal basements. Stacy and Ray had talked it over and decided that Ryan should have a new .357 Colt SAA to go with that Winchester rifle. They ordered a nice hand tooled belt and holster from El Paso Saddlery to hold the new side arm.

Stacy talked to Hazel and found out what she really wanted for Christmas and bought it. They wouldn't give grandma a sweater this year. Ray bought a case of the fine Bourbon intending on splitting it with Roy as their Christmas present to him. Stacy told Ray that 3 bottles was plenty for her father, what was Ray trying to do, turn the old man into a drunk? He also laid in several cases of the fine Merlot, the last of the vintage.

David and Rose hadn't made it up until the first week of August. They were very impressed with the new home and out buildings. They were also very impressed with Ray. The two Sergeants, though a generation apart found a lot to talk about from their Army days and then dented a couple of those bottles of Bourbon pretty good in the process.

They couldn't get over how much Ryan had grown. Ryan was, they said, the spitting image of his father at the same age. With an assist from Jennie, whom they met, Ryan had managed to pull straight A's during the spring semester.

David had taken Stacy aside and had pressed a check for \$5,000 into her hand. He was really impressed with Ryan and Ryan's shooting. Get Ryan a quality center-fire target rifle for Christmas and if that check wasn't big enough let him know and he would send more.

Scott and Susan didn't make it up until September. The first thing Scott did was to take Ray aside and call him a cradle robber and a dirty old man. Ray pointed out that Stacy was only 8 years younger than he and Scott all but called him a liar. Scott insisted that no old Army dog like Ray deserved to be married to such a good-looking, intelligent woman.

Ray allowed as how that's what one got for waiting for the perfect woman to come along. With the building program this summer Ray hadn't had an opportunity to make his semi-annual trip to the Commissary. He told Scott that Stacy and he would probably drive down the first week of November to stock up. Scott said he looked forward to seeing Stacy again and Ray asked Scott who was being the dirty old man now?

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Stacy and Ray talked it over and decided to get Ryan an M-24 SWS in the .300 Winchester Magnum chambering. They would cover any extra cost themselves and just tell

David if he asked that the check had covered the rifle. Ray called the gun shop in Jackson and ordered the rifle. The dealer assured him it would arrive in time for Christmas.

David also wanted the latest generation Leopold scope for the rifle. That was going to set them back plenty, but what good was a rifle like that without a proper scope? The .300 Winchester Magnum was available as a rifle only; the accessories were optional. The dealer said he would call Remington and see if he could get a complete system including the rifle in the .300 Winchester. If he could, it would save them some money. Ray told him to go for it.

Mountain Man – Chapter 12 – Steady Preparations

The first week of November they hitched on the trailer and headed for Denver. They spent 2 days with Scott and Susan. The men found time to go shooting and Stacy and Susan came along. Scott was shocked at how well Ray was shooting but when Stacy got to the line, Scott decided that she was far better than Ray and that he would be better served to keep his eyes on his own wife.

Susan decided that if Stacy could shoot, Scott had better teach her to shoot. She didn't have any bad habits to unlearn and did pretty fair for her first time on the range. She was no Annie Oakley, but her shooting persuaded Scott that he'd found a new shooting companion. Why hadn't she said something all of these years?

Scott showed Ray a new rifle he'd added to his collection. It was a M16A3 of unmentionable origin (that probably meant stolen). Did Ray want one, more were available and they were strictly off the books?

Ray allowed as how he could handle a couple, how much were they? \$1,000 cash money, Scott said. Were they hot Ray wanted to know. Probably hotter than a \$3 pistol after a gunfight, Scott admitted, was Ray getting fussy in his old age? Not at all, Ray said, how long would it take to get them? Was 2 hours too long Scott asked?

This was one decision Ray decided to leave Stacy out of. If anyone was going to end up in jail over a couple of hot M16A3's it had better be him. Hopefully, Stacy could plead ignorance if they got caught with the rifles. After all, Stacy was totally ignorant of the contents of those six boxes that he had in the shelter with the lettering painted over with OD paint wasn't she?

"Honey," Ray told Stacy, Scott and I are going to go to the bank and get some cash," Ray told her.

"Ok. What for?" Stacy asked.

"I have a chance to pick up a couple of rifles," Ray answered.

"Oh, what kind of rifles?" Stacy asked.

"You don't want to know," Ray said.

"Going to buy some hot M16's, huh?" Stacy replied.

What was the use? He was just trying to shield his wife, but he swore she could read his mind.

"Yes dear," Ray replied.

“Make sure they’re in good shape,” Stacy winked. Stacy Williams Benton was no fool. She had been an Army wife for 15 years before she met Ray. The moment she had laid eyes on the A3 that Ray had she knew he’d come away with it from the Army. He had as much as admitted that the rifle was off the books, e.g. stolen. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. “And, get some extra mags, will you, we only have 20.”

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The seller turned out to be a Marine Gunnery Sergeant who was feathering his nest prior to retirement. The guns weren’t stolen per se; they were more in the category of misplaced, just as his existing A3 was misplaced. The Gunny told him the rifles had lain around unaccounted for, for over 5 years. Actually, ever since the Gulf War, so that was closer to 10 years wasn’t it?

The rifles were in excellent condition and the Gunny could get all the used magazines Ray wanted from the scrap bin if Ray wanted to rebuild them and hammer out the dings. He wanted \$5 apiece for the mags, but he would hand select them so they could be made serviceable. Ray thought about those 6 boxes he had in the shelter.

“I don’t suppose you could come up with some misplaced M-203’s could you Gunny?” Ray asked.

“Well yeah, I can get you the 203’s, but I can’t get you any grenades for them,” the Gunny said.

“How much and how quick?” Ray asked.

“\$250 each and right now,” the Gunny answered.

“I’ll take 2 if you’ll take a check,” Ray said.

“I’ll guarantee the check,” Scott offered.

“You’re on,” the Gunny said and went to open his trunk. “Where are you going to get the grenades?”

“I have some,” Ray said, “But I could use some more.”

“How many more?” the Gunny asked.

“Say six cases,” Ray ventured.

“Jeezus, you don’t go half way, do you?” the Gunny let out a low whistle.

“It’s up to you Gunny,” Ray said. “I have one 203 and 6 cases of the M-406 grenades, but I could never get my hands on any of that HEDP stuff.”

“Are you talking about the M433s?” the Gunny asked.

“Yeah, that’s the designator,” Ray said, “M433.”

“Say I could get my hands on some of them, how much are you willing to pay?” the Gunny asked.

“I could go \$100 a case,” Ray said.

“I couldn’t do it for less than \$125 a case,” the Gunny said.

“Can you do 8 cases?” Ray asked.

“An even grand?” the Gunny said, “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Same question Gunny, how quick?” Ray said.

“Why don’t you tear up this check and make it out for \$1,500,” the Gunny suggested. “How about right now?”

The men loaded the 8 cases of M433 HEDP rounds, the 2 M-203’s and the 2 M16A3’s into Ray’s trailer. The Gunny said he’d get those magazines and give them to Scott. Scott said he had some springs and would ship the magazines to Ray. The Gunny drove off into the night. When they got back to Scott and Susan’s, Scott went to his basement and brought up a large cardboard box. He counted out 40 replacement springs and put them in a Ziploc bag for Ray. Courtesy of the USAF he told Ray.

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Ray filled Stacy in later that evening after they’d gone to bed.

“You mean to tell me that some guy was driving around with 8 cases of grenades in the trunk of his car?” she asked.

“I didn’t believe it myself Stacy,” Ray said. “I figured we have to stay over a day while he came up with them.”

“We’re getting out of Denver the first thing in the morning,” Stacy said, “Before we run into that guy and get blown sky high. How are you going to get those grenades and stuff onto the base to go to the Commissary?”

“I know a guy in Cheyenne that we can leave the stuff in his garage for a while Stacy,” Ray said.

“Isn’t that risky?” Stacy asked.

“Not with this guy, no,” Ray said. “He’s a retired Army supply sergeant, just like me and we go way back.”

They had moved the grenades into Scott’s garage and had put the other things in Ray’s toolbox on the back of his Ford. Scott was concerned that Ray might get caught and offered to put all of the stuff in his trunk and meet them in Cheyenne after they went to the Commissary.

That was a better alternative than involving his old Army buddy and it kept the people in the know to one fewer. Ray told Scott he’d go for it if Scott let him buy his gas. They had a deal. Scott would meet them at the exit at the 21-mile marker on the north side of Cheyenne in 6 hours. They put everything in Scott’s trunk and Stacy and Ray headed for Cheyenne. They made their purchases at the Commissary and met Scott as planned. They buried the boxes deep in the load of food on the trailer and left for Jackson Hole.

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Ray drove straight through to Jackson Hole. He didn’t want to get caught with the rifles, launchers or grenades. Stacy fell asleep just after the sun went down and didn’t wake until Ray stopped for gas in Jackson. He would have preferred not stopping, but his gas gauge gave him no choice. They drove to the cabin and spent over an hour unloading the pickup and trailer. With her nap, Stacy was in a frisky mood, but Ray was exhausted. She had to settle for snuggling.

Ray really hadn’t planned on spending the \$3,500 so they had to go back in town the next day and deposit a check drawn on his Money Market account into his checking account. He had plenty of money, but it was in the wrong place. They stopped by the gun store and the M-24 SWS was in. Stacy wrote the check for that on her account because she had deposited David’s check into her account. The Colt SAA was ready too, so Ray wrote the check for it.

They stopped by his private mailbox and the package was there from El Paso Saddlery. It was Friday so they decided to pick up Ryan and take him to dinner. Ryan couldn’t go; he had a study date with Jennie and wasn’t interested in going to dinner. Stacy suggested that he invite Jennie to go to dinner with them and suddenly studying didn’t seem to be so important.

Ryan called Jennie and Stacy ended up speaking to Jennie’s mom to assure her that the invitation came from Ray and her. They borrowed Roy’s sedan and picked Jennie up for the dinner.

Jennie was turning into a real beauty herself. Give her a couple of years to lose that just washed early teenager look and she would be breaking hearts all over Jackson. Stacy just hoped that Ryan’s wouldn’t be the first heart she broke. They skipped the cocktails

and wine, had dinner and dropped Jennie and Ryan off at Jennie's to study. Stacy half wondered what they were studying, she hoped it wasn't anatomy.

They returned the sedan to Roy and visited for a while before returning to the cabin. It wasn't Ryan's weekend to come to the cabin and Stacy wouldn't be a bit surprised if it went down to every third week or once a month. Her boy was definitely growing up, too soon if you asked her. One thing about Ryan spending so much time with Jennie was that he was doing so well in school. At mid-semester, he had straight A's going.

o

Back at the cabin, Stacy nailed Ray about the M-203's and grenades. Did he really intend to store those explosives in the shelter? You mean with the other 6 cases he asked. What? WHAT? You've been storing explosives in the shelter, Stacy wanted to know. He could move all 14 cases (1,008 grenades) out to the barn or shed, first thing in the morning. Ray decided to let Stacy cool off a little. It wasn't a fight yet, but if he pursued it, it might just turn into their first fight. Maybe in the morning she could be made to understand that the shed was out, it wasn't heated and the barn wasn't any better of an idea with all of that expensive horseflesh in it. (Ray lost and the grenades ended up in the barn for now.)

Two weeks later Ray got a call that he had a package from Denver at his private mailbox. It must be the magazines. It was still a few days before Thanksgiving, and Ryan had begged off coming out the previous weekend, another study date. Stacy suggested to Ray that they go to Jackson tomorrow (Friday) night and take Ryan and what's her name out to dinner.

Ray asked if Stacy meant Jennie and Stacy said she knew the girl's name perfectly well. Was Stacy perhaps being a little protective of Ryan, Ray asked? Ray had done pretty well for 11 months. But that was the wrong question to ask. It wouldn't really be fair to say they were fighting, but when he tried to cuddle that night, he learned a new expression, cold shoulder.

The next morning Ray got up, let Promise out, started a fire in the stove and got the coffee going. He didn't wait to drink coffee; he took out his frustration through exercise. He was done exercising, showered and sitting at the table drinking his first cup when Stacy woke up.

"Are you ready to exercise?" Stacy asked, last night apparently forgotten.

"All ready did," Ray announced. "Showered and shaved, too."

"I'm sorry," Stacy said, "I guess that Ryan's just growing up too fast for me. Am I forgiven?"

"No problem, forget it," Ray replied.

Stacy could hear the hurt in his voice. She knew that he didn't understand how she felt but it wasn't worth a fight. Hazel used to say let him get mad in the clothes he got mad in. Maybe that was better advice than she thought. Ryan was her baby! Well, she had to admit that he wasn't a baby anymore, far from it. She thought better of it and tried to explain to Ray where she was coming from. Ray listened courteously. She couldn't tell if he accepted her explanation or not. She did her exercises, showered, and joined him for coffee.

"Stacy, Ryan is in 9th grade. Four years from now he should be at West Point," Ray said. "I've got that old nagging feeling back again and I don't even know that there will be a West Point for him to go to. He'll have to spend summer of 2004 doing Cadet Basic Training. New Cadets do not have privilege periods because of the requirements of the intensive military training activities. There is a day set aside for a military family visitation, allowing New Cadets a short time of relaxation. New Cadets are also given time to call home on the weekend.

"During his first year, he will be a plebe. The transition from civilian life to a military environment is challenging. Ryan will learn military courtesies and standards, and he will learn to live by those standards every day. He will learn how to properly wear the various cadet uniforms. He will practice drill and ceremony, and he will learn how to prepare for inspections. It is not always easy, but it serves a purpose by building a solid foundation of leadership."

"You make it sound hard," Stacy said.

"It is hard, but Ryan will do ok and he will learn the meaning of Duty, Honor and Country," Ray said. "Lighten up about the girlfriend thing, babe, Jennie is a nice, level headed girl."

"I know," Stacy said.

o

Ray called for reservations for a table for 4. They left for town just after noon to get some shopping done and pick up the magazines. They went to her folks and Stacy suggested that he invite Jennie out to dinner with them."

"Thanks Mom," Ryan said, "She goes by Jennifer now."

Yep. Everyone was growing up. Jennifer looked especially lovely this night. Stacy concluded that Jennifer was going to be a real looker. Jennifer seemed interested only in Ryan. They were both getting straight A's and from what Stacy learned were probably no 1 and no 2 in their class this year.

Before the evening was over, Stacy concluded that Ryan was going to do all right with this girl, er, young woman. She was going to have to make up for last night to Ray. How could she do that, she thought mischievously?

It turned out that Ray had picked just about the optimum point to get out of the investment plan. Bush had won the election and the Supreme Court had essentially determined the outcome because of voting irregularities in Florida. Ray was certain that Bush would get the US into a war. He didn't know how or why, just that it probably would happen before he had been in office for a year.

Ryan brought up the subject of his coming to the cabin. Would it be ok if he only came once a month? Ray kept his mouth shut. Stacy took a deep breath and told him it was ok. But, she wanted to know if he would be spending Christmas vacation with them. Part of it anyway, Ryan assured his Mom. They had all of their Christmas shopping done except for their gifts to each other.

Stacy had seen a saddle almost identical to the saddles Ryan and she had. Ray was getting a new saddle for Christmas. Ray had noticed Stacy looking surreptitiously at a Jeep Cherokee. He was earning good interest on his Money Market account and decided to look for a good, low-mileage Cherokee. Fire Engine Red to match her hair, if he could find one. Stacy's hair had grown out considerably this past year. She was now into a brushing routine that seemed to take hours. Her hair was mid-shoulder length. She had mentioned that she needed a haircut to get rid of her split ends, whatever that meant.

They were pretty squared away with their preparations. Hopefully by this time next year those preparations would be complete. If Ray needed it, he would buy as much as 18,000-gallons of propane this coming summer at the rate of 3,000-gallons a month starting in May. However, from the looks of the gauge, he wouldn't need that much.

o

They decided to spend the night in a motel and do some more shopping the next day, alone. Ray benefited from the spat and Stacy's guilt in a big way. The next morning they got up, had breakfast and each went his or her separate way. Stacy wrote the check for the saddle and got it loaded into the Ford. She took it over to her folks and they hid it in the basement.

Ray had found a low-mileage 2-year-old bright red Cherokee. Driven by a nun who only drove it on Sunday afternoons (yeah right). It was in excellent condition and fully loaded. He dickered for quite a while to get a price he was willing to pay. He wrote a check on his Money Market account, which left him with just under \$100 thousand.

The problem was, where could he hide the Cherokee until Christmas? Ray called Bill at the market; could Bill store Stacy's 'new' used Cherokee for 4 weeks? Bill said sure and

Ray drove it to the market and parked it in the parking lot. He gave the keys to Bill and called Stacy and asked to be picked up at the market.

“How did you get to the market?” Stacy asked when she picked him up.

“A man gave me a ride in a bright red Cherokee,” Ray answered truthfully, omitting that he was the man.

“I sure would like to have a Cherokee just like that,” Stacy commented. “It would match my hair.”

“Really?” Ray said, “Gee, I don’t know babe, I’ll bet they’re pretty expensive.”

“Probably,” Stacy said and dropped the subject. “You couldn’t find me a present?”

“I got you a little something babe,” Ray announced.

“I don’t see a package,” Stacy retorted.

“I have it put up,” Ray said, “There’s no place to hide it at the cabin.”

“I wouldn’t peek,” Stacy said.

“There would be no way you could keep yourself from peeking,” Ray admitted.

She dropped the subject and they headed back to the cabin. “It must be bigger than a breadbox,” Stacy thought.

o

Ray probably should have bought Stacy a washer and dryer, but that was no fit Christmas present. “I could,” he thought. “Buy her the washer for her birthday and the dryer for our anniversary.”

(Earth to Ray: The first anniversary is paper. You could call the instruction book to the dryer paper. Or, do you understand cold shoulder now?)

Ray finally decided to get Stacy the washer and dryer immediately and just make it an I Love You gift. Maybe he could get them on sale. If Mrs. Jenkins would take that wringer washer and the rinse tubs back, he might make out all right. He called Mrs. Jenkins. She offered him half of what he paid. He told her the washer hadn’t been used a lot since he bought it. She came up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of what he paid. He offered to deliver it to the store and she said he could have 90% of his money back. Ray stopped while he was almost even.

On Monday Ray loaded the washer and rinse tubs into the Ford. He told Stacy he would drop her off at the store and she could pick out her new washer and dryer, but make sure it was propane fueled. He took the washer and rinse tubs to Mrs. Jenkins and got his money back. The new Maytag's ended up costing him less than \$150 extra. They got a flex line and a vent kit for the dryer and headed back to the cabin to install the new machines. At least Ray had a two-wheeler now so he could get them down the stairs to the basement and not kill himself. Stacy was doing pretty good present wise and it wasn't even Thanksgiving.

They kept a fire going in the fireplace most of the time and the boiler only kicked on in the early morning hours. That was saving them a lot of propane. Ray wondered how big a dent the new dryer would put in his propane supply. He had already plumbed in the gas line, it was just a matter of hooking up the dryer and opening a valve. The problem was how to vent the machine and maintain the integrity of the shelter.

He decided to get a blast valve from that place in Utah. It might turn out to be cheap at twice the price. Meanwhile he could steal a pair of Stacy's old nylons and put one over the vent. He went online and ordered a 3 bar exhaust valve.

◦

Thanksgiving came and went. Hazel did her 3 entrée fare the same as the previous year. This year Ryan brought a guest, Jennifer. Ray noticed that Jennifer ate like Stacy, a little of everything with an emphasis on little. The past was long forgotten and Stacy seemed to be getting attached to Jennifer, the way any prospective mother-in-law would. That was a long way off. Ryan had 3½ more years of High School plus 4 years at the Point. If Jennifer was willing to wait for him that long, everything should work out ok.

The exhaust valve came in the week after Thanksgiving. Ray had a terrible time getting it in. He almost regretted telling them to add rebar and concrete to fill the block. That darn valve took 2 days to install with the tools he had available. When they had poured the slab roofs over the basement, Ray had rented a foam shooter and had sprayed 3" of polyurethane foam over the top of the basement's roofs and on the sides. He had topped the shelter's foam with a heavy layer of tar. Both basements were positively toasty from the boiler and the hot water heater. The boiler had been one of Stacy's better ideas.

◦

Christmas morning Ray called Bill and asked him if he could drive the Cherokee over to Roy and Hazel's house. Bill told him sure and he would have his wife follow him and give him a ride back. The keys would be over the Passenger side visor. Jennifer's family opened presents on Christmas Eve so she was able to be present for the gift opening.

Roy was incorrigible, waiting to the very last to dig out the rifle from David and Rose. Ryan was ecstatic about the revolver, but Roy finally got around to the M-24 SWS, Ryan almost lost it. Jennifer seemed well pleased with the sweater and friendship ring Ryan had gotten her. For some reason, Hazel didn't get a single sweater this Christmas and everyone had thought to get Jennifer a gift. When they were all done, Stacy asked Ray if he hadn't forgotten something.

"Oh, I'm sorry babe," Ray said. "It's in the Ford, would you go get it, I have to go to the bathroom?"

Ray heard the motor of the Cherokee start up. Stacy raced the motor a couple of times and come back into the house.

"You were right Ray," Stacy said, "I wouldn't have been able to avoid peeking."

The birthday present had been harder to come up with. Ray ended up buying a set of snow tires for the Cherokee and another spray bottle of Chanel No 5 Cologne. The Anniversary gift was paper in the form of a gift certificate. They had stayed in town at Roy and Hazel's through their Anniversary but headed back to the cabin after she had redeemed the gift certificate with Stacy taking the lead and Ray in trail.

During February, Ray and Stacy decided to order 4 deluxe one-year food packages from Walton Feed. About the time the food was scheduled to arrive they had a 10-day snowstorm and the phone line went down. When the line finally came up, they received a call from the trucking company. When could they deliver the order from Idaho?

Ray told them exactly how to get to the cabin and said they could bring it anytime. The truck pulled in during the afternoon of February 21st. Ray had paid for the food with the debit card for his money market account. They hauled all of the food down to the shelter and placed it on the shelves. Walton's said to buy 4 gallons of oil for each one-year supply of food. They needed 16-gallons of vegetable oil. They already had plenty of sugar on the shelf.

March came in like a lamb. It took them until April 11th to get dug out once the snowstorm stopped. Ray had downloaded the tax forms from the net earlier and he spent the snowed in period trying to figure out his taxes. He had a fair idea how much he owed, so they took the papers to a Tax Preparer and wrote a check for Ray's estimate of the taxes he owed.

The Preparer filed an extension of time for them because he didn't have time to complete the return before the filing deadline. With the taxes out of the way, Ray could assess where they stood financially. They decided that they could handle another two years of food from Walton without putting them in a bind, so they bought 24 gallons of oil at the market.

The cows were due in May and the mares in June. Ray made arrangements for the vet to come to the cabin and check on the animals. He was the same vet who had inseminated the cows. The two gray mares shared the same sire, but the black stallion had another. Ray loved the new saddle and was impatient to get back on the stallion.

Ryan would be 15 this year and he was already pressing Stacy to get a learner's permit as soon as he was old enough. Roy told Stacy he would teach Ryan if she permitted him to get the learner's permit.

o

Ray and Stacy had no idea that in just 5 months, Ray's nagging feeling would start to become reality. Bush would use those events to start first one and then a second war. He would call it a 'war against terrorism'. Sunday the 15th was Easter Sunday. Ryan had begged off coming to the cabin for the weekend, Jennifer had invited him to attend church with her and her family and for Easter dinner.

Stacy had asked Ray if they were going to go to town on Sunday for Easter church services. Ray said that though he had a strong Christian faith, he wasn't going to be a hypocrite and only attend church on Easter Sunday. Stacy felt the same way and they had very compatible beliefs, having both been raised as Lutherans.

Going to church didn't make you a good Christian. It was how you conducted yourself in daily living. Roy and Hazel attended church most Sundays, but they weren't dogmatic about it. They were seeing to it that Ryan was being raised as a Lutheran and even had him enrolled in those classes that one took before making a decision to join the church. Meals were always accompanied with a silent blessing before digging in. A person shouldn't break bread without at least acknowledging from whence it came.

Jennifer was also a Lutheran and attended church regularly. Maybe she would influence Ryan to attend on a more regular basis. On the way back to the cabin, Ray mentioned that the Tax guy had told him that the filing deadline was Monday the 16th because of Easter. What was one day, more or less? Stacy agreed with that from behind the wheel. They only used the old Ford for chores anymore. She really loved this Cherokee. Maybe if Ray were really, really good, she would even let him drive it one day.

Mountain Man – Chapter 13 – The Beginning...

The spring and summer of 2001 didn't stand out much as these things go. Ryan was splitting his time between staying in town to be with Jennifer and staying at the cabin. He was 15 now and Roy had gotten him through the rough spots and he could keep a car on the road.

Ray let him drive the Ford around the acreage to polish his driving skills and learn to operate a vehicle with a four on the floor. Ray intended to pick up an older car and restore it so Ryan would have something steady and dependable, yet inexpensive; maybe something without an electronic ignition. Ray could handle the older motors, but he couldn't do much with those electronic ignitions.

He had talked it over with Stacy and she agreed. They agreed on most things. Ray hoped that she would let him drive the Cherokee someday; it had cost him a bundle. Being married had made Ray appreciate waiting for the perfect woman to come along. Stacy was just that, perfect.

Ryan was shooting his new M-24 a lot and was shooting under a MOA, all the way out to the end of the range, 600-yards. He might just end up on a shooting team someday. Jennifer had lost that just washed look and her beauty rivaled Stacy's.

They had two new calves, one of each gender, and were getting so much milk that Ray decided to try and learn to make cheese. Both mares had foaled and presented them with two gray fillies. Michael told them he had another stallion they could use to breed the new fillies when they were old enough.

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With so little to do around the acreage, Ray decided to start the wood gathering early. Besides, he had Ryan to help on some weeks and he wanted to take advantage of it. They worked at it steadily and had ended up with the largest pile of wood ever.

Ray had put in a 100-gallon gas tank on legs. He would have preferred a bigger tank, just in case, but they didn't use that much gas. The order had come in from Walton Feed and they had enough food for 6 people for a year.

Summer passed quickly and towards the end of August, it was time for Ryan to stay in Jackson and start his sophomore year of High School. Both Jennifer and Ryan had completed 9th grade with straight A's.

Ray found an old clunker that wasn't all rusted out and had it in the barn to start the restoration process. Scott and Susan had squeaked out time for a trip to Jackson Hole. Scott took one look at the shelter Ray and Susan had put together and had told Ray that he knew where he was coming if TSHTF.

Ray told Scott to be sure and bring his armory, if he did. Susan and Stacy were becoming good friends and sometimes the men thought the two women were hatching up plots to make them toe the line better.

On September 11, 2001 Ray was outside running Promise when Stacy came looking for him.

“Mom just called Ray,” Stacy said an urgency in her voice, “You’d better come to the house.”

They turned on the old TV and watched the airplanes crash into the World Trade Center buildings over and over. The second tower to be hit fell first, followed a short time later by the first. Speculation was that tens of thousands had died. Then it turned out that an airliner had also crashed into the Pentagon. Later in the day they learned that possibly a 4th airliner had been involved, but it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Wasn’t that in the same area that they had rescued those miners from?

They watched more TV that day than they had since they had been married. Ray was positively glued to the set, and was prognosticating that Bush finally had his excuse. It took days for the story behind the terrorist acts to come out. They stopped following it on TV; it was just a constant rehash of the same events, over and over. Ray kept his eye on the news on the net. He also ordered another 4 years’ worth of the supplies from Walton Feed. This was going to get a lot worse before it got better.

o

The novel *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* featured a soldier on the front cover of the novel. It was a picture of Rick Rescorla. He was a Platoon leader in the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) under Lt. Colonel Hal G. Moore. Lieutenant Rick Rescorla of Diduryk’s Bravo Company, who later died in the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, later remarked after having policed up the battlefield in Charlie Company’s sector following the assaults:

There were American and NVA bodies everywhere. My area was where Lieutenant Geoghegan’s platoon had been. There were several dead NVA around his platoon command post. One dead trooper was locked in contact with a dead NVA, hands around the enemy’s throat. There were two troopers – one black, one Hispanic – linked tight together. It looked like they had died trying to help each other.

While WTC2 was being evacuated under his direction, he sang to the employees:

*Men of Cornwall stop your dreaming;
Can’t you see their spearpoints gleaming?
See their warriors’ pennants streaming
To this battlefield.
Men of Cornwall stand ye steady;*

*It cannot be ever said ye
for the battle were not ready;
Stand and never yield!*

o

It turned out that some terrorist organization, al-Qaeda or was it al-Qaida, was being blamed for the attacks. The Muslim terrorists had apparently attended flight school right here in the US. Bush made some announcement about going to Afghanistan to root out the terrorists.

The stock market was spiraling downward at a tremendous rate and Ray thanked God that he had gotten out of it when he did. The Federal Reserve Board was cutting interest rates too, what effect would that have on the nearly \$100,000 Ray had in the Money Market account?

The propane tank was full, all 20,000-gallons (~90% fill). They had 20 cords of firewood stacked and split. Stacy had relented, finally, and the 14-cases of grenades for the M-203 launchers were stored in the shelter.

Ray was spending more and more time on the net watching the news. He was working on the old car, too. The motor was out and disassembled. He had taken the block in and had the engine sleeved and the heads milled. It was just a matter of finding time to re-assemble the motor before he started in on the rest of the vehicle. He had yanked the drums and had them turned in Jackson. He also had a new battery bought and put up.

They decided that Christmas was going to be smaller this year in terms of their spending. Ryan had about all of the guns he needed as did Ray and Stacy. It would probably be one of those clothes Christmases where everyone just got their wardrobe filled in.

Roy hadn't been feeling well lately either, something about his heart. He had undergone an angiogram and angioplasty because his tired old veins and arteries were getting clogged up. The doctor had told him to lay off the Bourbon, but Roy only pretended to agree with the doctor. Well, he didn't smoke did he and that was a good thing wasn't it?

Why is it as we get older that time seems to pass more quickly? Summer was over and Ray and Stacy were on their trip to the Commissary in Cheyenne. They spent 4 days with Scott and Susan this year and Ray and Scott had worked out a plan for Susan and he to bug out to Jackson Hole if TSHTF.

They didn't have any children and both Scott's and Susan's parents had passed on. Scott had managed to get another A3 rifle from the old Gunny before the guy had retired. Scott and Susan had bought 2 of the one-year deluxe food supplies from Walton Feed and he had picked up a trailer and a used diesel pickup. Ray told Scott that as far

as he could see, Jackson Hole had to be one of the safest places in this part of the country to ride out most of those TEOTWAWKI scenarios.

◦

They stopped at the Commissary at Warren AFB and loaded up. Ray bought a little extra because he was worried about how things were going. Downhill, he had said, and fast.

He was worried about his beautiful redheaded wife whose hair was below her shoulder blades and Ryan. Married life had taken a toll on Stacy; she was now up to a frightening 117 pounds.

Ray had managed to keep the roll off his gut too, but the exercise was getting harder and harder. They drove straight through to Jackson Hole; stopping only long enough to eat, fill the gas tank and the potty breaks.

It was cold enough to leave the meat in the trailer when they got home. They unloaded all of the other food and stored it in the basement. The next day Ray cut up and added the pork to their freezer.

He had taken a feeder steer to the locker plant to be butchered, cut and wrapped. It would be ready the week before Thanksgiving. They would go into Jackson, spend some time with Roy, Hazel and Ryan and bring the meat back to store in the freezer. Their plans suddenly changed when Hazel called to tell Stacy that Roy had had a heart attack and was in bad condition.

◦

Ray drove the Cherokee to Jackson; Stacy was just too upset to drive. During the rapid trip into Jackson, Roy Benton, aged 67, passed away. By the time they arrived at St. John's Hospital, there was nothing to be done. Hazel was very upset but was containing her grief.

Ryan was beside himself, but Jennifer was consoling him as best as she could. Ray spoke briefly with Hazel and made arrangements for the funeral home to pick up Roy. Later that afternoon, Stacy and he took Hazel to the Mortuary and Hazel picked out the coffin and made the arrangements. Ray had offered to do it for Hazel, but she wouldn't hear of it.

The funeral was set for two days hence, the day before Thanksgiving. Stacy was holding up well, under the circumstances, but Ryan was learning about the other half of life, one more time. Ryan didn't know about the old wives tale that deaths often came in three's. Before his sophomore year was over, he was to learn all about that old wives tale.

With the funeral so close to Thanksgiving, Ray made reservations at the Lodge for Thanksgiving Dinner. He was sure that Hazel wouldn't be up to cooking Thanksgiving dinner this year. The funeral was well attended; Roy had made a lot of friends in the 67 years he had lived in Jackson. Jennifer was a great comfort to Ryan who seemed to be taking his grandfather's death very hard.

Poor Ryan, forced to grow up at the age of 7, knew that people got old and died. But, his grandfather was only 67, it just didn't seem fair to him. He was sure that he couldn't have made it through the day without Jennifer by his side. But, he tried to be brave and act grownup. That was a pretty tall order for someone barely 15 that had just lost one of the most important people in his life.

Under the circumstances, Jennifer's parent's had no objection to Jennifer joining Ryan and his family for Thanksgiving Dinner at the Lodge. Ray noticed that no one had much of an appetite and they ended up taking home most of the turkey and fixings.

It wasn't like they needed any more food at Hazel's either. Her refrigerator was filled to overflowing with food gifts brought by well-meaning friends to take the burden off them having to prepare meals at a time like this. Stacy and Ray put as much of the food as they could in the freezer, but since Hazel only had limited freezer space, they ended up taking a lot of the food back to the cabin.

Ray didn't have to worry about taking his present for Roy back to the store; he just left the 3 bottles of Bourbon in the case. Stacy made the trip to Jackson by herself to return the gift she'd gotten Roy. She stayed over for the night. It was their first night apart in the nearly two years they had been married.

Ray contented himself to play with the new puppies Promise had bestowed on them. Apparently Promise had finally found a boyfriend. To fill the other empty hours, Ray finished assembling the engine for Ryan's old beater. With the engine assembled, he found time to drop it in and to install the new brakes. He put in the new battery and tried to turn the motor over. Then, he took out the starter to take to Jackson and exchange it for a rebuilt.

o

Stacy returned to the cabin and told him that Hazel was doing well under the circumstances. Ryan had finally accepted Roy's death. That Jennifer was quite a support for Ryan; Stacy sure hoped that worked out. Ray told her the car was back together, he'd worked all night. They needed to go back into Jackson and pick up a rebuilt starter and a kit for the carburetor. He wanted the vehicle ready to repaint before Ryan's 16th birthday. The Dodge Charger was going to be painted just like General Lee from the old Dukes of Hazard TV show.

The snow came and Stacy and Ray settled into their winter routine of exercise, walking and keeping up their skills with the rifles and handguns. The US had sent troops to Af-

ghanistan, just like Bush had promised. Ray told Stacy that it wouldn't be too much longer before Bush made some excuse to try and take out Saddam.

He had this new war on terror, after all, and noises were being made about weapons of mass destruction. Saddam had used poison gas on the Kurds and they qualified as weapons of mass destruction. Ray told Stacy that he doubted Saddam had any weapons of mass destruction. Any he had, Ray suggested, had probably already been moved to Syria. Stacy didn't know what to make about the whole situation.

The second and third deaths were not all that long in coming. Stacy received a phone call from a lawyer that David and Rose had been killed in an auto accident. They got Ryan and got on an airplane to attend the funerals.

Some drunk had slammed into their vehicle broadside killing them and himself. The couple had no other children and had retained the lawyer to take care of things in case the unexpected happened. The lawyer was the Executor of the Estate. Ryan was to get all of his grandfather's many guns and the family photos. Everything else was to be sold at an estate sale and the proceeds put into trust for Ryan until his 21st birthday.

The tragedy was especially hard on Ryan because David and Rose were the last living links to his father. There was Mom, of course, but it just wasn't the same. In order to cope with his grief, Ryan buried himself in his studies and was spending more and more time with Jennifer.

It was the spring of 2002 and Ryan Williams was growing up much faster than he had planned. Hazel had announced that the home was getting too much for her to keep up and that she was thinking of selling it and getting an apartment. The only things that were holding her back was the shortage of rental housing in Jackson and Ryan living with her.

Stacy and Ray talked it over and decided to invite Hazel to move in with them. Ryan could get a Restricted Driver's license to drive to school; or, if Hazel didn't sell the house until after his birthday, a regular driver's license.

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The Charger was ready for the paint job to turn it into General Lee. Late in April, Ray drove it to Jackson to have the paint job done. He'd managed to download several photos of the car from the net and the body shop would hammer out the dents and paint the car just like the car in the photos. It would be ready in time for Ryan's birthday.

Ryan wasn't too keen on his grandmother selling her home and forcing him to live at the cabin. However when he got the restored Dodge Charger, he had his out. He could drive to school and go to town whenever he wanted to study with Jennifer. They had talked, as teens sometimes do, about getting married after Ryan graduated from West Point.

Ray could see Bush building his case for going into Iraq. It was just like he predicted. This war, unlike the Gulf War he had participated in and where Ryan Sr. had been killed, wouldn't be over after a month long bombing campaign and a 4-day 'Hail Mary' maneuver. This war, he told Stacy would go on and on.

The UN didn't seem to be going along with Bush either and Ray said he doubted that the coalition would have as many nations in it as it did the Gulf War. The stock market was still in an uproar and although Bush was taunting that the tax cut would turn the country from the recession, the Democrats were claiming just the opposite. And, who the hell was Howard Dean?

o

David and Rose's estate settled rather quickly. Not only had Ryan been the beneficiary of their life insurance policies, the couple had accumulated more than many people realized. With the sale of their home and assets, Ryan had a trust fund in excess of \$300,000.

Because of his age, the insurance proceeds had ended up in the money Market account that Stacy maintained for her son. The Trust Fund earnings were to be rolled over to maximize the amount of the fund. Ryan could get money from the trust only in the direst circumstance before his 21st birthday. The Money Market account that Ryan and Stacy had together was now bigger than Ray's.

While they had been back for the funeral, they had gone to David and Rose's to find the photos and look at the guns. Ray hadn't paid a lot of attention, it was almost as if he were intruding. Ryan had taken a small set of keys to the various gun cases and stuck them in his pocket.

Ray remembered seeing two Garand's; some pump shotguns, some pump rifles, but really hadn't paid a lot of attention. The lawyer, who was an estate specialist and a dyed in the wool liberal, had arranged to have the guns shipped to the gun store in Jackson since they couldn't take them back on the plane.

Since the will specifically bequeathed all of guns to Ryan, the lawyer, who didn't know the difference between a rifle and a shotgun, hadn't included them in the inventory of the estate's assets. He had had the guns and all of the ammo taken to a gun dealer to be shipped.

The guns had come in and Ray had picked them up, but again hadn't paid much attention. He just put the boxes of ammo in the shelter and the gun cases in Ryan's room. In September Ryan finally had a chance to look at his grandfather's guns. He came carrying a gun to Ray in the living room.

"Ray, what kind of gun is this?" Ryan asked.

Ray looked up and almost had a heart attack. Ryan was holding a Schmeisser machine pistol. Since it didn't have a wooden buttstock, Ray surmised that it must be a MP40. The MP38's, if he recalled correctly, had wooden butt stocks. The MP40 was the standard German submachine gun for most of WWII. It was descended from the virtually identical MP38, the only differences being cost-saving alterations to some of the components.

The MP40 was a revolutionary weapon as it was made almost entirely out of stamped sheet metal parts, with plastic furniture. It was an economical weapon to produce, reliable, compact and capable of producing a high volume of fire. This approach to weapon design highly influenced the British Sten, and the American M3 Grease Gun. The MP40 was a much-prized war trophy, the British forces in particular preferring MP40s over their Sten guns, the ammunition being interchangeable.

Unlike the impressive given by films (particularly, *Where Eagles Dare*), television series and pulp novels, MP40s were typically only issued to platoon and squad leaders, the majority of soldiers carrying Karabiner 98k rifles. The MP40 was often called the Schmeisser, after weapons designer Hugo Schmeisser.

Although the name was evocative, its staccato rhythm resembling the chatter of a submachine-gun, Hugo Schmeisser himself did not design the MP40, the weapon instead being produced by engineers at Erma. Schmeisser nonetheless helped design the MP41, a wooden stocked version of the MP40, which was issued to police units.

The MP40 had a length of 833mm, though its retracting stock could allow the weapon to shorten to 630mm. The odd spur near the end of the barrel was designed to allow the troops to hook the MP40 onto the firing ports of armored personnel carriers and halftracks. (Now you know)

"Ryan are there any more guns like that?" Ray asked.

"There are two of these and a bunch of other guns I don't really recognize," Ryan said. "I know the Garand's, but I've never seen .22 rifles or shotguns like those."

"Would you mind showing them to me?" Ray asked, excited.

"Naw, come to my room," Ryan said.

There were 2 Winchester model 97 Trench guns from WW I in near mint condition. They must be worth \$2,500 to \$3,000. Both of the Garand rifles were in mint condition and had seen little use. They were worth a pretty fair penny to a collector, too. There were 2 brand spanking new Winchester model 62 rifles that looked like they had never been fired. There were the two MP-40s, of course, with about a dozen and a half magazines, and there was a 1903A4 rifle with an M-84 scope, again in near mint condition.

“Ryan, you have a fortune in guns here,” Ray explained. “Your grandfather mentioned that he had some very special pieces in his collection, but I had no idea. Maybe we had better check those ammo boxes that I put in the shelter and make sure it’s all ammo.”

Ryan put the MP-40 back in its hard shell case and followed Ray down to the shelter. They started to open the boxes one by one. The first 4 boxes held M-1 Garand clips still in their hermetically sealed cans. The next two boxes held ammo for the 1903A4.

The last four boxes held Mark IIA1 Pineapple hand grenades, a dozen to the box. Ray remembered David saying that he had been in supply for a few years, had David collected things the way that he had?

Since Stacy had finally relented and allowed Ray to bring the 40mm grenades back to the shelter from the barn, Ray didn’t see any sense in re-opening that can of worms. He suggested that Ryan should not mention the contents of the boxes to Stacy.

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The first anniversary of the World Trade Center was filled with a recounting of the events of that day. Those 40 members of flight 93 had been brave souls. It depended upon whom you listened to whether the target of the terrorists had been the White House or Congress. (Congress)

And, not everyone credited the passengers with bringing the plane down. There were some questions that had come up about the transponder signal being cut off up to three minutes before the plane crashed and some person on the net even claimed that the US had shot the plane down using a microwave device aboard a C-130.

They were pretty certain that the design of the World Trade Center Towers had been the culprit that led to the collapse of the buildings. Apparently the impact had had knocked insulation off the steel beams that then buckled in the heat causing a floor to collapse and started a domino effect.

Ray was now convinced that it was just a matter of time before the US invaded Iraq. Bush was already talking to Blair and trying to put together a new coalition. The UN remained sharply divided with Russia, France and Germany opposed to action in Iraq.

“They probably have vested financial interests,” Ray thought. “What a mess.”

The year had passed so quickly and it was coming up on the anniversary of Roy’s death. It was time for the trip to the Commissary once more, too. Scott and Susan were on a road trip somewhere, Ray couldn’t remember where. Stacy and he would drive to Cheyenne, stay overnight, hit the Commissary and drive back home.

Hazel hadn't gotten around to listing her house yet, though she said she planned to do it any day now. Ryan was still staying with Hazel, and still going with Jennifer. They were now in their junior year and still pulling straight A's.

Stacy was now 47, going on 48, but didn't look a day over 35; Ray was 56 years old and Ryan was 17. This thing between Ryan and Jennifer was all but a done deal. A year and a half of School and 4 years at the Point would see them married. The first two colts, fillies actually, were getting old enough to breed and the two older mares and three cows had been bred. The size of the herds would jump drastically within the next year or two. Maybe it was time to think about expanding the barn. Then again, maybe next year.

In many ways, the holidays had changed forever. Roy was gone, as were David and Rose. Hazel didn't have the enthusiasm any more. Ryan was older and almost a grown man. He had gone to the summer camp at West Point and had come back more excited about the Academy than ever. Ryan had decided that he would pursue the Military and Science Field of Study.

West Point offered 21 optional majors along with 24 fields of study. Ryan believed that this field of study would prepare him well to be an Infantry Officer. Both Stacy and Ray had hoped that Ryan would pursue an engineering degree, but it wasn't their choice to make.

Because Hazel had lost her enthusiasm for the holidays, they would dine out both on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Stacy has suggested that with three things so close together, Christmas, her birthday and their anniversary, that Ray do what everyone else seemed to do and just get her a single gift.

Ray's response to her suggestion was to get two small gifts and one large gift. The problem was he didn't know what large gift to get her for 2002. Neither of them needed anything or seemed to particularly want anything. Hazel wasn't a bit of help either. His final solution was to sign up for Direct TV and replace that old 19" black and white set with a new 32" color TV. They could certainly afford the \$50 a month the service cost.

Stacy had a similar problem getting Ray a Christmas present. She was going to get the TV, but Ray beat her to the punch. Instead, she got Ray an ICOM radio receiver and a Diamond Multiband antenna. One thing led to another and within two months, Ray had taken and passed his ham radio technicians test. Stacy was so proud of his accomplishment that she bought him an ICOM ham radio and a new antenna for the radio. They worked together to set up a small radio shack of sorts in the shelter next to Ray's computer.

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In February of 2003, Colin Powell appeared before the UN, but it didn't do any good and as a consequence, Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq. The US quickly defeated the Iraqi military but became occupiers of the country.

At least the stock market had turned around, but the interest rates were still very low. Had they not had everything paid for in full, they might have been in financial trouble. Their Money Market accounts had earned less than \$3,000 apiece for 2002. Ryan's trust fund was growing nicely, but they had no idea what the financial wizard of a lawyer had the trust invested in.

There was Ray's Army pension, but it didn't seem to keep up with inflation. Still their wants and needs were few. The 20,000 gallons of propane just had to be maintained, propane didn't grow old like gasoline and diesel fuel. They still burned wood in the fire-place and that kept their propane usage to a minimum.

Ray followed the Iraqi Freedom with interest and now that they had a real TV, he became a devotee of the cable news. Stacy wasn't certain if Ray's watching the cable news was all that good of a thing. Frequently when one of those retired Generals or Colonels would come on and give his expert opinion about something, Ray would react or overreact to the expert's opinion.

Stacy watched some of the experts and soon came away with the opinion that each network had two sets of experts with opposing views. They just used whatever expert supported that particular network's slant on the news.

Hazel finally sold her home during the summer of 2003 and moved in with them because she couldn't find an apartment. Ryan moved back to the cabin, too, but he was putting a lot of miles on General Lee. He'd leave early in the morning and return home late at night, usually after spending the evening studying with Jennifer. They were basically tied at number 1 in their class, both having maintained a 4.0 average beginning with 9th grade. You had to go back to 8th grade and add in Ryan's one B before Jennifer had a higher grade point average.

Scott was calling Ray more frequently now. Both men were convinced that it was just a matter of time before another large terrorist attack on the US. It was during one of these conversations that Stacy found out what Ray's other wart was. Ray didn't much care for the Israelis. She tried to talk to him about it, but he refused to enter into a discussion on the subject.

She suspected that it had something to do with the first Gulf War, but Ray steadfastly refused to get into it. Stacy saw a fight of monumental proportions lying beneath the surface of that subject, so she let it drop. Ray didn't bad mouth the Israelis, per se, but he was very critical of some of their policies. Everyone, she decided, was entitled to his or her opinion.

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Ryan and Jennifer were seniors, at last. Stacy viewed the circumstance with mixed feelings. This was Ryan's last year at home. Then he was off to West Point for that dreadful summer training program and a year as a plebe.

Ryan had approached Stacy about proposing to Jennifer. Stacy knew it was just a matter of time until he did, but persuaded Ryan to wait until Graduation. If they still felt the same way, he had her blessing.

But, was it fair to Jennifer, she asked, to have Jennifer tied down while he was off at the Point? Jennifer, he informed her, would be attending Brown University on a full scholarship. They wouldn't be so far apart after all, Brown University, in case she didn't know was in Providence, Rhode Island. That was only about 150 miles from the Academy.

Stacy shared her concerns with Ray. Ray could remember when Jennifer was Jennie with that fresh scrubbed teenager look. Jennifer had matured into a beautiful young woman and in many ways reminded him of Stacy.

There might be 30 years difference in their ages, Stacy and Jennifer, but except for the color of her hair, Jennifer could be mistaken for Stacy in dim light. True, Stacy had a more mature figure, she still weighed 117 pounds, but it wouldn't be all that long when there wouldn't be much difference between the two women.

Taking his life in his hands, Ray told Stacy as much. He was rather surprised at her reaction, she agreed with him. Ryan had two loves in his life, his mother and his fiancée. Oh, Ryan had asked Stacy all right, but then had gone ahead and did what he wanted to do anyway. Jennifer said yes, she would marry him, when and if he graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point.

Mountain Man – Chapter 14 – ...Of The End

The war in Iraq was going just about the way that Scott and Ray had believed that it would. A quick, but indecisive victory followed by an occupation that wasn't ending. They couldn't find the WMD's because they were probably looking in the wrong country. Ray thought Syria and Scott thought Iran.

They had come up with a deck of cards of the most wanted. It was a deck of 52, but weren't there 55 names, or had Ray missed something? They had confirmed killing the same guy three times. When would the fourth time come that they confirmed killing him?

They had dropped bombs all over Baghdad to get Saddam, but all they ever got was some more civilians. The death count continued to climb even though the President had stood on the deck of a carrier and declared the war was won.

Oh yeah? If the war was won, how come so many people were being killed? Were all of those deaths car accidents? Perhaps unexploded American ordinance? How come if the US had won the war there were so many people running around with AK's and RPG's? There was something very wrong here and Scott and Ray began to exchange phone calls with an increasing frequency.

They watched the deaths mount; 100; then 200; then 300, then 400 and all SINCE the war had ended. Ray finally found out who Howard Dean was, too. He was the former Governor of Vermont, or was it Maine? Well somewhere up in the northeast anyway. He a lot of money to spend on the campaign, too, but the man couldn't seem to buy a vote. There was Gephardt from Missouri running, again. This John Edwards fella seemed to be ok for a Democrat but he wasn't getting the votes either.

2003 had come and gone and we were starting to lose the war we had already declared ourselves to be winners of. Well, they had killed off Saddam's 2 sons; that was some progress. Then towards the end of 2003 they had found Saddam himself hiding in a hole in the ground. Ray figured that would be big news, but that story died so quick he began to wonder if it were really Saddam or one of those impersonators.

Bush had drawn some sort of line in the sand about turning over power to some sort of interim government. It was sort of like playing the old game of tag where the kid said Here I come, ready or not. The US had announced that the turnover would occur on June 30, 2004. The governing council couldn't agree on much, but that didn't matter, there were going to turn it over on June 30, 2004, ready or not.

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Some wannabe former hero from the Vietnam era, Senator John Kerry had locked up the Democratic Party nomination. Just what the US needed, Ray and Scott agreed, another liberal from the great state of Massachusetts running for President. No one knew

who would be Kerry's running mate, the convention hadn't occurred yet. There had been some talk of good old Hillary Clinton being Kerry's running mate. Fortunately for Kerry, someone started a new smear campaign on Hillary having to do with fund raising irregularities.

If her husband had been getting sex in the oval office, what would Hillary do? Give sex in the oval office? Hadn't America had enough of the Clinton's? Must have, because all of a sudden the media didn't have any idea who Kerry would pick. Probably wouldn't be Hillary, Ray suggested to Scott. Maybe he figured out that he'd get killed 5 minutes after he were sworn in assuming he won with Hillary as his running mate. It was so bad the CNN was running a poll, eliminating potential running mates.

Ryan was just weeks from Graduation. He had finally come clean with his Mom and told her that he'd asked Jennifer to marry him. But, he quickly pointed out that, her yes was conditional. It was yes WHEN and IF he graduated from West Point.

Stacy started to say something, and then thought better of it. The when was 4 years away and Ryan would be 22 years old. Jennifer and he were tied as the top two students in the graduating class and unless one of them fouled up on the final exams, they would be co-Valedictorians of their graduating class.

Stacy also noticed that Ray was spending more and more time on the phone with Scott. There was some talk surfacing about some prisoner abuse thing at some prison in Iraq and there were even pictures. Some of those prisoners were no doubt terrorists and deserved intensive interrogations. But, according to some news sources as many as half of the prisoners didn't even belong in that prison in the first place.

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Then there was that 9/11 Commission trying to fix blame on the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Didn't those people know that the US had already identified all 19 terrorists? Oh, that was right, the 19 terrorists were dead, so they had to find someone else to blame didn't they?

There was a whole lot of wouldda, couldda and shouldda going around at the moment. For a few days, the hot news item was that a member of the 9/11 Commission had written a memo and should therefore resign from the Commission. She didn't and the news moved on to the next hot item, those prisoner abuses in some Iraqi prison.

The phone traffic between Denver and Jackson Hole got so heavy at one point that Stacy suggested that either they move to Denver or Scott and Susan move to Jackson Hole, it would be cheaper.

"Babe, you don't realize how serious the situation is," Ray insisted. "Just today I read an article in the LA Times about some birds taking out the power at LAX. It screwed things up at the airport for a long time even though the power was out for only a few minutes."

“How can a bird knock out power at an airport?” Stacy asked. “It sounds fishy to me. Are you sure it wasn’t a fish, honey?”

“I have no idea, babe,” Ray said, “But that and the power black outs last year show just how fragile parts of this country’s infrastructure is. If a bird could disrupt air traffic for an hour and some equipment in some jerkwater town could blackout the whole northeast, just imagine what a group of dedicated terrorists could do.

“What was it, 19 terrorists that took out the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon? What if it were 190 terrorists with lots of explosives who read the US papers? Those reporters are practically printing a roadmap for a group of dedicated terrorists.”

“What got you so worked up?” Stacy asked suddenly concerned.

Figuring that he’d maybe said too much, Ray tried to back off a little.

“I’m sorry babe,” Ray replied. “I’m just an old Army dog and when I see some of this stuff on TV and online it scares the crap out of me. Maybe I’m overreacting a little.”

“Maybe,” Stacy said. “I almost lost it when Ryan admitted that he had proposed to Jennifer. But then I figured it was still 4 years until he graduated from West Point, so no harm, no foul.”

“I wonder if they have a shooting team at West Point?” Ray thought aloud. “Ryan is just about the best shot I’ve ever seen. Even moving the target out to 1,000 yards didn’t slow him down much. He just bought that new scope and started shooting MOA groups.”

“Did you know that he sometimes slips and calls you Dad when he’s talking to me about you?” Stacy asked.

“Really?” Ray responded. “I’d be proud to call him son, but Ryan needs to remember his father.”

Their conversations usually started on one topic and ended up somewhere else. Wasn’t it that way with most married couples? They had made it through the first five years with barely a hitch. They’d come close to a major fight a couple of times, but Ray was a little more careful now that he knew what a ‘cold shoulder’ was and Stacy knew when not to press Ray.

If they had been madly in love practically at first sight, their relationship was a testament to the power of love. Their relationship was deeper now, much deeper, but they still had that spark that had existed almost from the moment they’d met. Maybe that explained Ray’s concern over current events.

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A week later, Ray was looking at the LA Times online and called to Stacy.

“Stacy, would you look at this?” he said then read it to her. “AP News. US: Berg Had Been Advised to Leave Iraq; Two More Americans Charged in Abuse Case; Israeli Soldiers Launch Gaza Incursion; US Soldiers Battle al Sadr Supporters; and, US Probes Alleged Afghan Prison Abuse.” (LA Times, 5-12-04, 0745 PDT)

“What’s that Berg thing about?” Stacy asked.

“Some American contractor was a prisoner of some of the insurrectionists in Iraq and they beheaded him on video,” Ray explained. “Claimed it was in response to the prison abuses.”

“That frosts my butt,” Stacy snapped. “The Muslim newspapers won’t publish those pictures because they’re so offensive, but US TV plays them over and over again. If you ask me, they ought to arrest those media people. I mean really, Ray, do they think that Muslims don’t watch CNN?”

“I agree babe, and I’ve got a bad feeling,” Ray acknowledged.

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Nothing happened immediately. Plans were being made over in the Middle East, but they would take time to implement. Meanwhile, the High School held its Commencement exercises and Stacy, Ray and Hazel listened proudly when Ryan gave his part of the Valedictorians address. My, wasn’t that Jennifer a real beauty? Ryan was a lucky man.

They formally announced their engagement after the Graduation ceremony. Apparently Ryan did listen to Stacy, at times. That called for a celebration and Ray suggested that everyone come out to the cabin because he might just happen to have some steaks thawed out.

Poor Ray was such a dork at times. Stacy had to call Jennifer’s parents and make the invitation ahead of time to make sure they didn’t have other plans. They did, but it wasn’t anything special that couldn’t wait. Besides, Jennifer talked about the cabin all of the time and they were dying to see the place.

After a feast of New York Strips, grilled potatoes, salad and one of Stacy’s pies, Ray showed Jennifer’s father, Ron Perkins, their basement and shelter. Ron couldn’t get over the amount of food and supplies Ray and Stacy had accumulated. Was all of that food still good?

Ray assured him that the food in the shelter had a nearly unlimited shelf life and that they rotated the food in the basement. Perhaps the biggest surprise to Ron was Ray's propane tank. It was rated at 300 psi and was a full 12' in diameter.

"What is that, about 30' long?" Ron asked.

"Never measured it Ron, but I suppose so," Ray answered. "Bought it used from a supplier on the east coast. They hauled it in on a semi flatbed from the rail yard. Had to use a crane to set it in place. That was a major investment. It took us two summers to get the tank filled, too. It was fully certified and came with a ten-year warranty."

"Isn't it a bit close to the cabin?" Ron asked.

"It's almost 200 yards, Ron," Ray said. "If it were to explode, there wouldn't be anywhere on this acreage safe from the fireball, but we'd be ok down in the shelter."

"How did you manage the plumbing?" Ron asked.

"Rented a fancy trencher and put the pipe well below the frost line," Ray said.

"Well, it looks to me like you're set for WW III," Ron said.

"Remember that Ron," Ray said, "Remember that well."

"Was that an armory I saw in your shelter?" Ron asked.

"Yes, I've got a few hunting rifles and a little ammo set aside," Ray commented.

Did I forget to mention that Ron had worked for the ATF for a number of years and that Ray knew that about the man? Sorry! But, loose lips sink ships.

Ron suspected that Ray probably had all manner of GI surplus war materials in that armory of his. But, he didn't work for the ATF anymore and hadn't for years. Besides, Ray HAD told him to remember how well prepared they were out here at the cabin. Yep, if something really bad happened, this might be the place to come.

In the years since he'd built the shelter, Ray had built a series of bunks and fitted them with used twin mattresses. Nothing fancy, but they could sleep ten; more if they slept in shifts. Stacy and he had talked to Michael and Nancy, too. If something really bad happened, it was agreed that they would try to get to the cabin. Their boys had graduated from high school and gone off to college. The boys were instructed to try to get to Jackson Hole and the cabin if they could, if TSHTF.

Scott and Ray had it pretty much worked out. At the first hint of trouble, Scott would load their food and his weapons on his pickup and bug out for Jackson Hole. They had the one-year food supply for two plus a fair amount of food on the shelf. Ray had ten of the

one-year food supplies in the shelter and all of the food in the basement. Between them, they were well armed. Stacy and Ray made 2. Scott and Susan made it 4. Michael and Nancy made it 6. Hazel made it 7. If the boys could get back and Ryan and Jennifer could get back, that made it 11. Yep, they were set.

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Scott and Susan had put their home on the market. Scott was 200% convinced that it was just a matter of time before the US had to pay big time for being the world's policeman. And the war in Iraq wasn't going all that well, either. They had found a home in Jackson and that cut the distance between them and Ray and Stacy's cabin to just 30 miles. They had made an offer on the home in Wyoming subject to their home in Denver selling. They had an offer, but it was below their asking price and they were thinking about it.

"I don't know Scott," Susan said, "Why don't we counter offer on the house and split the difference?"

"Ok honey, but if they won't go for it, I say we just sell and get out of Denver," Scott replied.

"Whatever you think best, Scott," Susan said. "I'll put an ad in the paper and have a garage sale. We have too much 'stuff' to move to Wyoming."

"I think I'll load up the food and most of my weapons and move them up to Ray's now," Scott responded. "It will be that much less we have to move when the time comes. You set up the garage sale. I should be back before you have it to help out."

Scott loaded the food from Walton's on the trailer and most of their extra food on the pickup. He called Ray to tell him he was on the way and to clear off some shelves in the shelter and in the basement. He was bringing everything out of his arsenal except for the 2 M16A3's and two Kimber .45 autos. He would keep 2 cases of 5.56, a case of the M433s and a case of .45acp ammo. He would leave the Barrett with Ray, but it hadn't better have a scratch on it when they moved to Jackson. He would be there in 2 days, but he'd have to turn around and head back to Denver.

"That was Scott, babe," Ray said after he'd hung up. "He's moving their food and his arsenal to the shelter."

"Good," Stacy said, "I'm looking forward to seeing Susan."

"She's not coming," Ray said, "This is just a fast trip to move their survival supplies."

"Did they sell their home?" Stacy inquired.

“Scott said they counter offered, but they were going to sell regardless,” Ray explained. “They don’t have much time before they have to come up with the financing or pay for their new home in town.”

“It will be nice having Susan so close,” Stacy commented.

“I’ve been thinking that we should put in a diesel storage tank and a bigger gas tank,” Ray said. “Maybe a 300-gallon gas tank and convert the 100-gallon tank to diesel. What do you think, babe?”

“With gas prices what they are, I think it will be expensive,” Stacy laughed, “But it’s probably a good idea. Call the fuel supplier and take care of it.”

It was expensive. By the time he’d bought the extra tank, transferred the gas, added more gas and added the PRI-G and bought and stabilized the 100-gallons of diesel, Ray had spent over \$1,000. But, they were one step closer to being ready for whatever.

Scott had breezed in, unloaded, spent the night and headed back for Denver. Ryan had left for summer training at West Point. Jennifer was getting ready to head off to Brown in a few more weeks.

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Ryan was tall and handsome like his father. Jennifer had filled out nicely, too and if the truth were known, Stacy envied her just a little bit. She’d had a figure just like that 30 years before. Well, she wasn’t all that bad, she was keeping right at 117 pounds, but the exercise was getting to be more work. Still, at her age, she still had that hot ‘bod’. And, it was obvious that Ray appreciated her efforts, he was a dirty old man after all.

Ray had had to get reading glasses. They were a real bother, too. At least he’d been able to get a cheap pair off the rack at a store in town. Ray had always envied Scott having an M82 Barrett rifle. But, he had a pretty sizable investment in guns as it was and couldn’t see spending the nearly \$15 thousand Scott had tied up in the optics and 3rd generation night optics. Besides, he was a pretty fair shot with his 7.62x51mm’s and he didn’t figure they needed more than one of the long-range expensive rifles.

Scott called as soon as he’d gotten back to Denver. The counter offer had been accepted and they would be in Jackson in two weeks. Was Ray managing to keep his hands off the Barrett? Good, see you in two weeks and yes, the Barrett was safely tucked away in the armory.

Ray and Stacy decided to start gathering in wood early this year. They still had 10 cords, but you could never have too much wood. The wood was proving to be a lifesaver; they hadn’t even needed a full 3,000-gallon load of propane. They spent the two weeks after Scott called hauling wood to the cabin. While it wasn’t any more work than in previous years, it seemed like it was more work, maybe it was their age.

After Scott and Susan arrived in Jackson, they took about a week to get settled in. Ray spent the time cutting and splitting the wood. At least he didn't have to split so much kindling any more. Oh, he still had the old wood stove, it was in the barn, but he didn't use it very much at all. He took time off to haul a beef to the locker; that would top off the freezer nicely.

After Scott and Susan were settled in, Scott spent some time helping Ray gather firewood. Why did Ray think he needed 24 cords of firewood, Scott wanted to know? Well, what did he care Scott said, as long as Ray didn't expect him to help split it; it was no sweat off his brow.

Was that a fingerprint Scott detected on the Barrett, he asked Ray? Well, you didn't say I couldn't look at it Ray had explained. Scott's comeback had been that he didn't mind Ray looking, but why hadn't he wiped the rifle down? Ray said he had, every time he'd gotten it out to look at it, but he must have missed that one.

Hazel was doing poorly. The life had seemed to go out of her a lot when Roy died and a little more when she'd sold the house. Ryan leaving for the Military Academy made her feel as if she were even older. Hazel was experiencing what was being classified as Depression in Old Age.

The growing incidence of depression in old age has stimulated considerable research activity in recent years. Under detected and under treated, it is a profoundly disabling condition associated with a high rate of suicide. However, an enthusiastic approach to its detection and management can considerably improve an otherwise poor prognosis. Depression in Old Age is a distillate of the research information currently available, describing the causes, epidemiology and presentation of depression in the elderly.

As a consequence, Hazel wasn't eating right and her health was suffering. Hazel wasn't suicidal by any means, but she was slowly dropping weight despite Stacy's every effort to fatten up her mother. Short of holding Hazel down and force-feeding her, there was nothing they could do. Stacy even tried to get Hazel to see a Psychologist, but Hazel would have none of it, insisting that she was fine.

Stacy and Ray had talked about it more than once, but putting Hazel in a nursing home just wasn't an alternative either of them was willing to consider. Considering the condition of many of the nursing homes in the US, that was probably a wise choice. Some of them were little more than holding pens for the elderly and were understaffed and provided a barely adequate diet.

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Ryan had made it through the summer and had begun to attend classes. Although his letters seemed upbeat, Stacy wondered how he was really doing. (Just fine Mom) He had gained a little weight, probably from additional muscle mass, although he still wore

the same size clothing. School was challenging, he said, but the small class sizes made up for it. Jennifer was so engrossed in her studies that she barely found time to write, opting instead to call home. She told her mother that she was getting hit on a lot and that she was thankful she had that diamond to flash and drive the guys off.

Ryan, you may recall, had a lot of money in that Money Market account and he had gotten Jennifer a diamond larger than the one his father had gotten his mother. Stacy had gone with Ryan to help pick out the diamond. Ryan knew his own mind and all she could do was make sure that the perfect stone was really perfect. He had spent a literal fortune on the 2-carat stone, but it was his money. At least he had good taste, Stacy reflected, probably came from her side of the family.

Ray was trying to calculate how many years' worth of fuel they had in that huge propane tank. He had only intended to put in a 10,000-gallon tank, but while he was hunting around on the net, he'd run across the used tank website and found that he could put in the used 22k tank for little more than the cost of a new 10k tank. As big as it was, the tank almost dwarfed the cabin.

The generator used about 2 gallons an hour at full load. If they only ran the generator, they had enough fuel for over 400 days. But, there was the water heater and the boiler, so figure a year. The solar assist to the water heater helped greatly and that thin film covering on the roof made a big difference. So did burning wood in the fireplace, yeah, for sure a year, maybe more. That tied in pretty well with their food supply, he estimated about 400 days of food on hand.

All cadets received Christmas, spring, and summer leave, along with the four-day Thanksgiving break. Christmas leave is normally two weeks in length following the completion of first semester final examinations. Spring leave is about 10 days, including the weekends. Summer leave is about 3 or 4 weeks depending on a cadet's military leadership training assignment.

When academics begin first classmen or seniors get twice as many weekend leaves as second classmen or juniors. A plebe or freshman will have only a few weekend passes. Plebes also may leave West Point for extracurricular or cultural trips and athletic trips. There is also the traditional Plebe-Parent Weekend scheduled each fall.

When Stacy and Ray had gone back to New York for the Plebe-Parent Weekend, Ryan had informed his mother that he was going to Providence for Thanksgiving to be with Jennifer. Four days, he claimed wasn't enough time to get to Jackson, spend time with the family and get back. Besides, he missed Jennifer terribly. Just don't do anything foolish Stacy had warned. Oh, the sex thing; Ryan promised his mother that he'd be careful. Now, what had he meant by that?

Ray told Stacy that it didn't matter what Ryan had meant by that. Ryan, he said, wouldn't do anything to mess up his West Point education. Besides, it wasn't any of Stacy's business Ray insisted.

Stacy wasn't so sure she agreed with that, but Ryan was growing up, that was plain even to the most casual observer. He had a new, leaner look. Not the weight thing, more a difference in attitude. As far as his weight went, he had added some muscle mass during the 6 week summer session and it looked good on him. His weight was higher but other than some solid muscles, she couldn't see any difference.

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Stacy was more concerned about Ray than she let on to anyone. He seemed so obsessed with this Survivalist thing. He was spending long hours on the net, reading 8 online newspapers a day, visiting ABC, CBS, MSNBC, CNN and FOX News. He had ordered a large supply of Army Field Manuals too, with subjects ranging all the way from Medical to the mundane. He had visited a physician in Jackson and had somehow managed to get the poor old doctor to write all kinds of prescriptions for him.

He had sent off to some place called Emergency Medical Supply and stocked up on all sorts of medical supplies including things that only an experienced paramedic or doctor should use. The doctor must have been impressed with Ray, she decided, the old guy had practically emptied out his supply room of samples and Ray had been going back in town monthly to get more of the samples as they came in.

The basement was packed to nearly overflowing with their food and the food that Scott and Susan had brought. Every month, Scott and Susan came out and took what they figured they needed for the next month and replaced what they took with new food. Scott had even moved their freezer to the shelter. He had bought a beef somewhere, had it butchered, cut and wrapped and put it in the freezer. None of them were going to go hungry anytime soon. Susan, who had been married to Scott for 25 plus years, didn't seem to be nearly as concerned about Scott as Stacy was about Ray.

Thanksgiving came and went. It seemed so strange not to have Ryan and Jennifer sitting at the table. Hazel refused to come out of her room for Thanksgiving Dinner and it turned out to be just the four of them, Scott, Susan, Ray and Stacy. Stacy had finally managed to get Hazel to see the family physician and he'd prescribed Prozac, telling Hazel that it was a vitamin that would help perk her up.

Hazel knew exactly what Prozac was but she didn't resist taking it for fear that Stacy would force it down her throat. Even Hazel had begun to notice that she was a bit out of kilter. She hadn't been this light in weight since before Stacy was born. Unfortunately, the Prozac took about 3 weeks to have full effect and the trip to the doctor came just the week before Thanksgiving. That was ok, Stacy brought her a tray and Thanksgiving just wasn't the same without Roy and Ryan around.

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Over in Iraq, things had gone from bad to worse. That al Sadr fellow had finally been arrested, but his followers were on a rampage and the number of followers seemed to increase faster than the US troops could kill them off. Those prisoner abuses had resulted in convictions of 7 enlisted personnel. No one was really certain if they were guilty of abuse or of following orders, it depended upon whom one believed.

The insurrection had started small, back around the first of the year, but it had steadily grown. Those photos and the American media's insistence on showing every photo they could get their hands on only fueled the flames. Wolf and Geraldo and any number of the more inflammatory news personalities were having a field day.

It was anybody's guess if it were the new disclosures about Cheney, Powell's sudden resignation or Kerry's selection of a Vice Presidential candidate that had cost Bush the election. With these two guys, it was a lose-lose proposition.

Nader had even gotten more votes than expected and who on earth would vote for Ralph Nader? A lot of people, apparently. Nader probably had those votes that Bush had needed to win the election. But, Bush was still President until January 20th and he wasn't letting up on the war on terrorism one little bit. The turnover had occurred on June 30th just as Bush had planned or failed to plan. Boy, was that a disaster. The UN wasn't much help either; everyone seemed to have his or her own agenda.

The Iraqis weren't content to keep the fighting in Iraq either. Any number of the Iraqi insurgents had joined in with al Qaeda and they were hatching a plot of monumental proportions. Some of them spoke and read perfect English, having been educated in American Universities.

The Americans seemed almost to be proud of the flaws in their infrastructure. One didn't have to be an expert researcher to find the soft spots. A few carefully placed explosives could bring the American power grid down and a few more carefully placed explosives could keep it down.

The water supply of America was especially vulnerable and there were those little bugs in the bottles in Syria. The Americans even sold explosives in their Wal-Mart chain. They called it lamp oil and fertilizer, but the Iraqis called it ANFO. Security for legitimate explosives wasn't that tight either; in some states all one needed was a driver's license to buy detonators, fuse and dynamite.

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It was all so easy. Most Americans couldn't tell the difference between a Chinese, Japanese and Korean. How then could they be expected to tell the difference between an Iraqi, Iranian and a Saudi? All Orientals looked alike to most of these Americans, as did most Arabs. The Americans couldn't even differentiate among the various Latino groups and called everyone who spoke Spanish a Mexican.

Yes, it was going to be so easy to infiltrate the country and get those explosives. And the poisons; there were so many poisonous plants readily available in America. They could probably even grow castor beans and produce Ricin given enough time and a little equipment.

[I have had some excellent technical advice from rockriver. He is helping fill in small gaps about the Academy and adding to the story line. I am eternally grateful. – TOM]

Mountain Man – Chapter 15 – Pop Goes the Weasel

All around the Mulberry Bush the monkey chased the weasel. How did Bush get into this discussion, I thought Kerry beat him?

Ryan and Jennifer arrived home on the same flight for Christmas. What a handsome looking couple they made. Ryan was changing, but unless one had gone without seeing him for a few months the changes were barely noticeable.

It had been since the first part of September since Stacy had seen Ryan and she noticed the changes right away. He seemed, what was it, more self-confident? Jennifer was a welcome sight too but Stacy paused in front a mirror and wondered if she needed a face-lift.

“No Stacy, Jennifer is 30 years younger, remember?” Ray had said when he caught her looking and she had confessed. “You are holding up just fine, all of you.”

Ray was remembering fondly the times after they moved into the cabin before Hazel had moved in when Stacy and he sometimes went around in the cabin in the buff during the winter months when the fireplace was roaring. Those were the days. These days, however, Ray’s mind was focused on the growing problem in Iraq and the potential it had to lead to an explosive situation right here in the good old US of A.

At least Ryan was a little rusty with the rifle and Ray could hold his own with the young man. Probably be back to like normal before Ryan left, though, before Christmas leave was over. Ray and Scott had made a point of bringing Ron into their little circle.

They weren’t quite ready to share all of their secrets yet, but Ron was pretty much aboard. The really strange thing about Ryan was that he was calling Ray Dad. It had just sort of slipped out and Ryan had never backed away from it. Christmas ended far too quickly for all of them and the kids were off to the east coast once more.

The ice with Ron was finally broken when he showed up one day with Scott to do some shooting. Ron produced a hard shell case that contained a MP5SD6. The SD6 was identical to a SD3 except for the trigger group. The trigger group on the SD6 had 4 positions, safe, semi-automatic, 3-round burst and full auto.

Ron snickered big time at the two men. They looked as if they’d seen a ghost. Ray went back to the cabin and bought out one of Ryan’s MP-40s and one of his M16A3/203’s. Now it was Ron’s turn to blanch.

“Do you have grenades for that 203?” Ron asked.

“Wouldn’t make much sense to leave it on the rifle if I didn’t, now would it?” Ray replied.

"I don't mean to be overly nose y Ray, but do you have anything else I should know about?" Ron asked.

"Are you asking for yourself personally, or did you revert to being an ATF agent?" Ray asked.

"I haven't been an ATF agent in years, Ray and this little beauty here is completely off the books." Ron laughed.

"Do you know what a Mark IIA1 Pineapple is?" Ray asked.

"Yes, it's a defensive hand grenade that they invented during WW I and used through the Korean War," Ron said. "But I haven't seen any of those in years. Do you have a couple?"

"Does four dozen qualify as a couple?" Ray asked.

"I guess so," Ron said. "Man those things must be older than dirt. Are they in good condition?"

"I don't know, they're still in their hermetically sealed transport cases, but I expect so," Ray opined.

"Where did you come up with something like those old things?" Scott asked.

"Actually, they are technically not mine," Ray said, not elaborating, "But possession is 9 points of the law."

"Are they part of the stuff that Ryan got from his grandfather, the one who was killed in the car accident?" Scott asked. "I happen to know that's where the MP-40's came from, you told me, remember?"

The men had a good time that day, shooting the MP-40, the MP5SD6 and Ron even got the chance to fire a grenade through the 203. When they were done, Ray led Ron down to his armory in the shelter and showed him around.

Ron wanted to know whom the Barrett belong to and Scott accepted responsibility. It looked like they were pretty well set, Ron said. And, by the way, he'd replace that M403 grenade from his stock.

Whoa. An ex-ATF man who was thumbing his nose at the AFT. What else did Ron have? They wouldn't believe him if he told them, he said, but if it was ok; could he move some of his stuff out here to the shelter? And, where did they get all of those long-term rations again? Apparently Ron watched the news, too.

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Hazel passed away in her sleep just after the first of the year. After much discussion, it was decided that Ryan wouldn't come back to Jackson for the funeral. Ray made the arrangements and Hazel was laid to rest alongside Roy. Hazel had passed quietly in her sleep and had such a composed, relaxed look on her face when Stacy had discovered her.

Hazel's death was a little easier for Stacy to handle; frankly she had been expecting it for some time. Ray remained quiet and supported his wife the very best that he could. Hazel had made prior arrangements with the funeral home and really all Ray had needed to do was to sign some papers. Everything was arranged for and prepaid.

Hazel, it later turned out, left everything to Ryan. Those mementos of any significant value to Stacy were already at the cabin and weren't mentioned in the will. Stacy hadn't realized that her mother and father had accumulated so much. Since Ryan was a signatory on the Money Market account, the funds were deposited in the account when the estate finally settled.

Ryan was becoming an Officer, he was already a gentleman, and he was well on his way to having his first million. The estate more than doubled the balance in the Money Market account. It seemed that Roy had been a pretty shrewd investor himself and Hazel had never let on. They hadn't been rich, but they had been pretty damned comfortable. That was about to become a moot point in the near future.

The Iraqis and members of al Qaeda had been infiltrating the US for months. It mattered little to them that the President, Kerry, had ordered the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. They had come to describe the US in the same terms, as had the Iranians, 'The Great Satan'. The US invasion had turned into an occupation, in their minds and the movement in Iraq was now away from a Democracy toward an Islamic state.

With the US withdrawal, thank Allah they took Saddam with them, the Iraqis recovered certain non-existent WMD's from a neighboring country to the immediate west of Iraq. Can you spell Syria? The Mullahs in Iran were most happy with the developments, too and Iran lent its support to the Iraqi cause.

All of a sudden Saudi Arabia experienced a population boom, but those new citizens looked suspiciously like Iranians and Iraqis. In due course, the new citizens had Saudi passports and were headed to the US to enroll in college. Yeah, right, and brown cows give chocolate milk. But, the Saudis had increased oil production dramatically and were the US's new best friend in the Middle East.

Of course, the Israelis took exception to this, but they were so busy fighting the Palestinian uprising that they didn't have time to do more than voice their dissent. Apparently all of those Saudi students had intended to attend summer school at the American Uni-

versities. Jennifer was home for the summer and Ryan came home after he finished summer camp.

Ryan spent his second summer at *Camp Buckner* an opportunity to further his military, physical, and leadership skills. Buckner was advanced training over and beyond his first *beast* summer. Actually, Buckner was a little more enjoyable. One week of Buckner included going to Fort Knox for a week that was primarily armor. This week ended with a million dollar minute where a huge demonstration of artillery and tank weaponry was demonstrated. Ryan was tremendously impressed.

Ryan was back in form having spent considerable time on the range. It seemed that Ryan only had time to spend on the range and with Jennifer; and Stacy practically had to make an appointment with her son to spend time with him.

That was easily enough accomplished, they invited Jennifer to spend some time in the guest room and Ryan was suddenly underfoot. Ryan had taken to watching the gold market and when it dipped sharply, had invested everything but the \$16,000 that his father left Stacy and Ray into gold Eagles.

He got Ray to keep the gold in a safe in the shelter. Ryan told Ray that that gold was going to be worth a lot someday soon. Ryan had inadvertently made the smartest move of his life since asking Jennifer to marry him.

Of course Ryan could have bought gold certificates, but there was something reassuring about the coins; they didn't burn and if the stock markets were shut down, they were cash in hand. Buying \$600,000 worth of one ounce Gold Eagles only required a premium of 4%. The price of gold at the time was \$440 and the coins cost \$462 each. He ended up with 1,300 one ounce gold Eagles.

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Ray didn't feel comfortable about storing over \$600 thousand dollars of gold in the shelter. It belonged in a bank where it was safe and secure he insisted to Stacy. Ray won that argument, too. Well sort of, Stacy had him install a floor safe in the barn under the pile of hay. At least the gold wasn't in the shelter and Ray even had trouble finding the floor safe without moving the whole stack of hay.

The safe didn't have a combination or key lock either. It had spring-loaded dead bolts to which one had to apply electricity to cause them to withdraw. To top it off, one had to have an especially strong magnet to lift the plate off the safe, it was flush with the rim and the seam was nearly invisible. The electrical connector was 6' away inside of a dummy duplex box.

Ray was pretty proud of the safe. As insurance, he wrote a letter to Ryan explaining how to open the safe on a sheet of plastic and put it in the barrel of Ryan's M-24 SWS. He sent Ryan a letter telling him where the letter was.

Scott and Ray couldn't understand why there hadn't been a terrorist attack on the US by now. They had expected all spring and summer, but it hadn't come. Jennifer had left the last week of August and Ryan earlier.

The terrorists planned to strike the day after Labor Day. It would, they felt, be the perfect time. Everyone would go to work after the holiday to ensure they earned the holiday pay. Millions of Americans would be trapped in high-rise buildings all over the US.

They bought some dynamite and detonators all quite legally on the open market; they bought fertilizer and diesel fuel; and they rented trucks and stole trucks. Ray was wrong about one thing; they were more than he would have ever imagined, several hundred in fact.

The first inkling they had that something was wrong was when Scott called. There was a major electrical blackout affecting the entire country, Scott said, and it seemed to be of suspicious origin according to CNN who was on operating on backup power.

Ray told Scott to call Ron and have Ron and him and Rosemary, Jennifer's mother, get their stuff and head to the cabin. He would call Michael and tell him and Nancy to head on out. As it happened, Michael Jr. and Bill were home for the Labor Day holiday and hadn't planned to go back to Cheyenne until later in the day.

That left Jennifer and Ryan to worry about. Jennifer was ok; Brown had experienced plenty of blackouts and was well prepared to handle another, for a time at least. Her father told her that if it went on for an extended period to get to Jackson Hole anyway she could and by all means, be careful. It was anyone's guess what was going on at the USMA, but Ray wasn't worried about Ryan, the USMA could take care of its own.

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Not all of the networks managed to come back up, but enough did that Direct TV carried the President's broadcast, live. Terrorists, according to Kerry, who had struck at the very core of the nation's infrastructure, had caused the nationwide power outage. The power would be restored sporadically because of the extent of the outage. Everyone was urged to be a good neighbor and help the less fortunate who were without power.

He, the President, was activating the National Guard and select Army units to provide temporary generating capacity to several of the larger cities. (Yeah, in the states that had voted Democratic in the election of 2004.) The power should be back on in 3-4 days, tops.

There were now ten people at the cabin. The shelter wasn't put into use other than as a radio shack, as an armory and as temporary sleeping quarters. The weather was still warm, for the Jackson Hole Valley, Wyoming and there was little to be concerned about.

They were good for a year, maybe longer, if it took that long to restore power. With all of the available labor, Ray decided it would be a good time to lie in that firewood.

Scott, Michael, and Ron had pickups in addition to Ray's old Ford F-100. With all of the labor, it only took them 5 days to haul 20 loads of firewood back to the cabin. Ray had gotten tired of swing a splitting maul after all these years and he had finally treated himself to a hydraulic splitter.

He got Michael Jr. to sawing the logs to fireplace length and Bill running the splitter. The boys made short work of it and in 5 more days had the wood cut and split. All the older men had to do was stack the wood.

Well, now, it had been 10 days and the power was still not on. And, the phone lines were now out. That meant no Internet, just the Direct TV as a source of news. Kerry had been back on TV after 5 days, explaining that as fast as the damage was being repaired more damage was being inflicted.

It wasn't possible, he said, to guard all of the hundreds of thousands of weak points in the system. Moreover, the utility companies were beginning to run out of repair parts. The US couldn't, he said, get parts from Europe because they used a 50-hertz system instead of a 60-hertz system. Be patient, power would be restored soon. And, God bless all of those Americans who had opened their hearts and homes to their neighbors. (He's starting to sound like Bush.)

Kerry forgot to mention that all hell was breaking loose in some of the major cities. The power outage had lasted for 10 days now. They could get the power up if they could catch the terrorists, but Kerry also forgot to mention that all of the Law Enforcement Agencies were about 3 steps behind the terrorists.

Between the feds trying to find the terrorists and local law enforcement trying to restore order in the cities, you couldn't get a call for help to any law enforcement agency answered, let alone responded to. That was a real shame too; someone had called in to report a bunch of Arabs loading barrels of something into the back of a Ryder rental truck. In fact, more than one call to report similar situations went unanswered.

Ron managed to hook up with a former friend from his ATF days when the phone lines came up briefly and the friend, who lived in Boston, promised to find Jennifer and try and help her get back to Jackson Hole. Ron had no doubt the guy would do it too. The guy had two choices, help Ron or go to jail, but Ron hadn't had to make the threat.

It seems that Ron's friend had the other MP5SD6 that had gone missing. The friend had located Jennifer after hours of searching and had arranged with a buddy to fly Jennifer in a private plane to Wyoming. It took the friend another two days and every favor he'd ever built up to get clearance for the flight. There was still no word from the USMA, but Ray still wasn't worried about Ryan. A week after he'd made the call, a friend from

Jackson came driving into the ranch with Jennifer in his car. It had taken them 4 days to make the flight from Boston to Jackson, one down and one to go.

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West Point never missed a beat in its training schedule. Admittedly communications were out so Ryan was unable to get word back to Jackson Hole that he was okay, and he hadn't heard from or talked to Jennifer. He assumed, hoped is perhaps a better term, and prayed an even better term that she was ok.

If Ray and Ron had anything to say about it, he knew in his heart that she was ok. As much as Ryan wanted to moon over Jennifer, he didn't have the time. One thing he was learning about was Non-Commissioned Officers, like Ray.

Officers might make a lot of the decisions, but it was the NCOs who carried out those decisions and made them work. Any NCO worth his salt would take a green young Lieutenant and help mold him into a real officer. Ray, he was sure was just such a man and would cover his backside.

Stacy was really worried about Ryan despite Ray's assurances that he was ok. She went to his room and pulled a box down from his closet shelf. The box contained the awards Ryan had earned in athletics in High School.

Ryan was aware that West Point emphasized athletics. During his freshman year, he joined the soccer team. Maybe he wasn't the best natural athlete in the world, but he worked very hard. He gained endurance and agility on the soccer field and at the same time learned how to work with a team. Then with his soccer running background, he took up took up cross-country in the spring of his freshman year of High School.

Ryan increased his endurance and ability to maintain the effort level even as it "hurt". Finally, he took up wrestling, both for endurance, and as a "man on man" and a team sport. The confidence he gained on the wrestling mat would serve him a long time.

There weren't a lot of medals. A participation medal for soccer, a single third place finish medal for cross-country and his varsity letter in wrestling. Ryan had said something about the West Point shooting team, but it had been a hurried, last minute comment and she wasn't sure what that was all about.

Finally, the phone system was brought up. Ryan was only permitted one call for 10 minutes and he had to choose between calling Jennifer and calling home. He thought about it for a long time and decided to call home. His mother must be frantic and Ray and Ron could do something to make certain Jennifer was safe. Ray was startled when the phone rang; he hadn't realized that service had been restored. It was Ryan! He called to Stacy and talked briefly to Ryan while Stacy came to the phone.

"Dad, I only get one ten minute call," Ryan said, "Is everyone there ok?"

“We’re in good shape Ryan. Your mother is coming to the phone,” Ray responded.

“Can Ron and you make sure Jennifer is ok?” Ryan asked hopefully.

“Jennifer got here yesterday Ryan, I’ll get her while you talk to Stacy,” Ray answered.

The relief in Ryan’s voice was palatable. “Wow! Thanks Dad,” Ryan said.

Stacy practically yanked the phone from Ray’s hand. Ray headed upstairs to the guest bedroom where Ron, Rosemary and Jennifer were.

“Jen, Ryan is on the phone,” Ray said. Her face lit up like the White House Christmas tree, and she rushed downstairs to talk to Ryan.

Stacy had a million questions, but satisfied that Ryan was ok, she somewhat reluctantly turned the phone over to Jennifer. She had tears of joy streaming down her face and noticed that Jennifer did too. She handed the phone to Jennifer and sought out Ray who had come downstairs and was in the kitchen area of the Great Room. Ray reached over and brushed her tears away and winked at her. She hugged Ray and laid one of those mind-blowing kisses on him.

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That was a relief, everyone was safe. The government and the utility companies were doing their best, but they simply couldn’t keep up with the terrorists. Every time they got a section of the grid up, it would fail a few hours later. Some of those Arabs who spoke English because they had attended American Universities and studied Electrical Engineering were pretty familiar with the American electrical grid. However, as the companies brought the grid back up, they were finally forced to build in safeguards, and over time, the terrorists’ efforts were having a reduced effect.

The terrorists weren’t fools and they knew that American ingenuity would eventually overcome their efforts to keep the grid down. For that eventuality, they had a phase 2 and after, a phase 3. But this was to be a long-term effort. Let the Americans think that they had the problems resolved before they moved on to the next phase; it increased the terror. The Great Satan would pay and pay and pay.

Jennifer hadn’t had to identify a major the first year of college, but had decided to study Biology. Brown had a wonderful Medical School and she was giving some thought to becoming a doctor. Maybe she could even get a scholarship to Medical School.

Ron and Rosemary were very proud of her and they told her it would be nice if she could get a scholarship, but, even if she didn’t, they would see to it that she got to go to Medical School if that was what she really wanted. For its part, Brown was making efforts to get the school back up and running, despite the electrical outages.

The terrorists finally abandoned phase 1 of their multi-phased attack. Now, they would sit back until America got to feeling safe before moving on to phase 2. The electrical grid was finally being restored, perhaps despite Kerry's best efforts to restore order.

The cities had burned from the riots, but they hadn't been as bad as everyone expected. Brown had notified its students that they could return to school and classes would pick up where they left off. School would run into summer to make up for the lost time. It was another tearful goodbye as Jennifer, Jen, boarded the plane for the trip back to the east coast. Ryan had called again and announced that he wouldn't be coming home for Christmas this year; he was spending his leave with Jen.

The two boys returned to school in Cheyenne. Michael and Nancy returned to the ranch, he was getting awfully tired of the nearly daily trips to take care of the stock. Scott had asked Ray if Ray would sell him a lot to put a home on. No, Ray told him, he wouldn't sell him a lot, but he would give him one. Ray and Susan returned to Jackson to make plans for building a new home on the acreage when spring came. It had been a tough fall, but things were getting back to normal.

It had been a TSHTF situation, but it had resolved itself, this time. It had been a perfect test of their long-term preparations and they knew that come what may, they would get through it. With the coming of winter, Ray had had a chance to better estimate his propane consumption too. He was now estimating that those 20,000 gallons would cover them for a full 2 years, maybe more, because of the firewood, the solar water heating and the electrical roof.

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Ron had moved those things of his out to the armory in the shelter. Ron was just full of surprises. In addition to the MP5SD6, he had a M16A3/203, a Beretta M92FS a Kimber Custom II, two cases of the M403's, minus one grenade, and a large supply of C-4 and all manner of detonators. Ron had put 6 years in the Corps and was a highly trained explosives expert. That was how he had ended up in the ATF. But, Ron hadn't liked some of the heavy handed tactics of the ATF and had quit and gone into selling insurance.

And shooting that grenade had been a test of the friendship, nothing more; Ron was very well trained in the use of the M-203. Ron and Rosemary had talked to Ray and Stacy about maybe building a home on the acreage someday, but right now, they needed to stay in Jackson because of Ron's business. Ron and Rosemary were closer in age to Stacy than to Ray, Scott and Susan.

Ray, Scott, Stacy and Susan decided to caravan down to Warren and replace all of the food they had gone through. Susan drove Scott's pickup and Stacy rode with her. Ray and Scott were in the Ford and visited the entire trip about the home Scott and Susan were going to build on the acreage.

Ray suggested that Scott build the new cabin fairly close to his and Stacy's cabin to limit the amount of propane piping. They could share the well and either meter the propane or just split the cost of refilling the tank. Scott and Susan really liked Ray and Stacy's cabin and were going to put in a duplicate of it. Ray had been thinking ahead when he put in the septic system to maybe someday subdividing the acreage and had put in a septic system he said would handle up to 10 homes easily. Scott and Susan could just hook into it.

They over did a little at the Commissary, but after the experience of this fall and early winter, they didn't give it a second thought. Scott loaded up on pork to emulate Ray's approach to keeping the freezer well stocked with a variety of meat. He also added a case of chickens. On the way back to Jackson Hole, the women were in Scott's pickup and the men were in Ray's.

Scott was going to put in a single, extra-deep basement like Ray's and maybe connect the two basements with a tunnel for the cold winter months. By the time they got back to Jackson, they had most of the details worked out. Ray had even offered to lend Scott the money until the house sold at 1% over the rate his Money Market account was paying. That would be a short-term loan at 4%.

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Back in Jackson Hole at the cabin, they unloaded everything and rotated some of the food stocks. Scott and Susan took the month's supply of groceries and headed back to town. Ray and Stacy broke their long standing rule and let Promise and her 6 fully grown puppies into the house for a while.

Seven dogs were enough for any family. The puppies had been raised in the barn and all of the females, including Promise, spayed. Promise still spent her time in the house, but sometimes preferred to sleep in the barn with her offspring. Ray took a lot of time and explained everything he and Scott had talked about down and back from Cheyenne.

Not surprisingly, the FBI hadn't located a single one of the terrorists. They reviewed the records of all of the Arab students who had flooded into the US after the US had pulled out of the Middle East, but all seemed to be genuine students, hard at work in the Universities. Saudi Arabia seemed destined for a bright future with all of those young people studying Biological Science and Chemical Engineering.

With Hazel and Roy gone and Ryan spending Christmas with Jennifer, the holidays were muted for the first time since Stacy and Ray had gotten married. They got back into their usual winter routine of exercise, walking, shooting and even running around in the buff from time to time.

It was a tough winter with heavier than normal snowfall. Was the drought finally over? The US had experienced several years of drought and the western US was as dry as a tinderbox. Each year seemed worse than the previous.

Lake Powell was beginning to dry up. According to the net, near record snowfalls were occurring everywhere. That was good wasn't it? Well, spring would bring floods, but that water was such a vital resource.

The terrorists were pleased with the record snowfalls, that meant more water and water was the key to phase 2 of their multi-phased plan. Phase 2 involved an attack on the water supply of the US. They had had plenty of time to prepare for this phase. They had storage lockers filled with innocuous looking containers of deadly poisons, fabricated right there in the University laboratories.

They had plenty of time and had been careful. No one suspected a thing. The climate determined, to a great extent, the poison of choice for the areas around the country. In the southwest where the climate was much like Africa, castor beans were secretly grown and the Ricin harvested. Yes, once the snow melted and the reservoirs began to refill, they would strike.

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Jennifer was going to stay in Providence for the summer, with only a brief visit home to coincide with Ryan's leave. She had taken a job as a lab assistant for a Biology Professor for the summer. It was some sort of intern position, but would give her valuable experience. Ryan was going to spend the summer between his sophomore and junior years split between Fort Irwin in the California, the National Training Center with OpFor opposition training forces working on maneuvers and battle planning and the other half at airborne school at Ft. Benning Georgia.

Attacking America's water supply was not going to be easy. Probably most Americans thought that it was as simple as pouring some contaminant into a reservoir somewhere and waiting for the fireworks. Nothing could be further from the truth. This wasn't the America of the 1800's or the first half of the 20th Century. Water went from the reservoirs to treatment plants and from there directly to the water supply that fed the homes and businesses.

Water was sometimes stored in towers and sometimes fed directly to the final users. In either case, it was essentially a closed system from the point that the water left the treatment plant. There were access points, but it would take careful planning if the terrorists were to poison the water supply and escape undetected. There was still phase 3 to follow in a year or so.

Despite the heavy winter, spring came early this year; let's see it was 2006. That's right, the spring of 2006. Lake Powell had some water in it, but it would take years to refill.

The terrorists only had one shot at the closed water systems, but what if they introduced something into the agricultural water supplies? No, that was part of phase 3, wasn't it?

Mountain Man – Chapter 16 – Phase 2

Ray was sitting at his computer, half humming, and half singing.

*Summertime, and the livin' is easy;
Fish are jumpin', and the cotton is high.*

*Yo' daddy's rich and yo' mama's good-lookin',
So hush, little baby, don't you cry.*

*One of these mornin's, you're gonna rise up singin';
You're gonna spread your wings
And take to the sky.*

*But 'til that mornin', ain't nothin' can harm you
With daddy and mammy stan - din' by.*

"You're in a good mood," Stacy said walking up behind him.

"Oh, hi babe," Ray laughed, "Yeah, I guess so. I've got that old lyric to "Summertime" stuck in my head, I guess."

"You'd better stick to humming, sweetheart, you're no Robert Goulet," Stacy suggested.

"Personally, I liked the Sammy Davis, Jr. rendition," Ray replied.

"What are you doing?" Stacy asked.

"I was just checking the food inventory," Ray said. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Go ahead," Stacy replied.

"Our water tank isn't that big Stacy," Ray said. "A couple of times we got low on water during the emergency until the pump caught back up. I was thinking that we should put in a large water tank, say maybe 10 or 20 thousand gallons."

"Why would you want a tank that big?" Stacy asked.

"You've heard me talking about someday subdividing the acreage," Ray continued. "That's why we, I, put in a septic system that could handle 10 homes or more. With Scott and Susan building a home now and possibly Ron and Rosemary moving here someday, it only makes sense to me to put in a large water tank. Besides, it would give us water to fight a fire in an emergency."

"Do whatever you think is right, honey, but don't break the bank," Stacy said.

The new well was a 6" pipe and it could supply plenty of water. A 6" pipe had a maximum capacity of 800gpm. Currently, they had a small tank, less than 500 gallons. The water all ran through a conditioner before it was used in the cabin. Ray had been shopping on the net and he figured that he could put in a water tank at least as big as his propane tank. They could even put in a simple hydrant system and get a trailer mounted pump and some hose to fight fires with. Conversely, a 12" pipe had a maximum capacity of 4,700gpm and wouldn't cost double the cost of a 6" well.

He checked the balance in his Money Market account, it was in good shape and slowly growing, and he decided to go for a huge 60,000-gallon tank. It would take 12 minutes to fill the tank from the well. He could put a pump on the tank outlet to insure water pressure. Make that a large pump to ensure plenty of water pressure. Sixty thousand gallons of water was a lot of water, but if there were a fire, a 1,500-gpm pump could empty the entire tank in 40 minutes. They could run 3 fire pumps and never empty the water tank, or four for an extended period.

Scott and Susan hadn't needed the loan after all, their house sold days after being placed on the market. They had hurried and put in the basement and the tunnel connecting the two basements. The tunnel was covered over and the house was nearing completion. Ray would be glad for that, they could move Scott and Susan's food and freezer to Scott's basement and free up some space.

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Ray had already picked out a contractor for the tank; he just needed Stacy's approval to go ahead. True, it was his leftover retirement money, but it was half Stacy's and it was a lot smarter to keep her in the loop. The contractor was starved for work and he quoted Ray a bargain basement price on a tank that large. He could even supply Ray with a discharge pump and put in a 12" line from the well. Did Ray want a larger well pump? Yes, a new 12" well Ray told him, and 3 or 4 1,500gpm fire pumps.

The contractor would start right away and they could plan for switching over to the new tank very soon. Did Ray need anything else? Well, there was this hydrant system he was thinking about, Ray said. Good idea, the contractor thought, he'd give Ray one hell of a deal. The tank, installed, was far less than the tanks Ray had been looking at on the net. The turnkey price was about as much for the entire system, extras and all, installed as the tank on the net. "No sweat," Ray thought, "I'd planned on spending more than that."

Scott and Ray had rented the trencher and run the propane and water lines to Scott's house. Scott had gone with the same 12kw generator that Ray had as well as the thin film roof covering. He built a matching shed for solar water heating and carefully insulated the pipes because his had further to run. Since Ray could supply several homes from that 20,000-gallon propane tank, they had decided to meter the propane.

Scott also moved his guns back to his gun cabinet. The Barrett seemed to pick up a lot of extra fingerprints. If Ray wanted to play with a Barrett, he could buy his own, Scott had told him. Ray did; it was a McMillan TAC-50 bolt action rifle and he had a dozen 5 round mags, 10 cases Hornady A-MAX 750gr ammo (2,000 rounds), high quality optics and a brand new 3rd generation MUNS on both of his sniper rifles. He didn't mention how much it cost to Stacy either; she would have had kittens.

Jennifer and Ryan finally made it home late in the summer. Ryan was full of stories about his time at Fort Irwin and at Benning. He was sure glad to get out of the heat and humidity of Georgia and back to Jackson Hole. He was going to join the rifle team at the Point. He spent a fair amount of time on the range with both his M-24 and Ray's new Tac-50.

Jennifer was going to go to Medical School. She would take a year after graduation and spend it in Africa, first. She and Ryan had decided to be married in the Protestant Chapel at the Point after graduation. Medical School was 3 years plus the Internship and Residency. The year in Africa would bring the total time to 7 or 8 years.

Ryan had a minimum 5-year obligation to the Army after the Academy and if he went to Advanced Schools and worked on a Graduate Degree, who knew how long it would take? Perhaps, they agreed, they could afford to spend 10 years out of their lives preparing for the future. They would still be young, only in their early 30's and could think about starting a family then. My, they were growing up! Poor Stacy would just have to wait to become a grandmother.

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Ryan had left to go back to West Point because his leave was up. Jennifer was just about ready to go back to Brown when Ron had a very mild heart attack. It wasn't serious, but it identified a medical condition that forced Ron to retire. He was barely 50 years old, but these things seemed to happen.

The doctor told Ron to find a buyer for his business because whether he liked it or not, he was retired. Actually disabled was more accurate, but the doctor was trying to spare Ron's feelings. As long as Ron took his prescriptions regularly, and got a reasonable amount of exercise, the doctor said, he should live to a ripe old age. Satisfied that her father was going to be ok, Jennifer left for her junior year at Brown.

It was late August and Ron and Rosemary sat down and talked it over. It only took a short time to put up a cabin and maybe they should just move out to Ray's acreage. Ron said it all when he suggested that if they didn't move; his customers would probably hound him TO DEATH.

Ray said to come on out, he'd give them a real fair price on a lot and he had propane and that new water system. Ron and Rosemary decided on a cabin identical to Ray and Stacy's. The acreage was going to end up looking like a housing tract. Ray and Scott

got busy and put in the water and gas lines and the contractor put in the basement and tunnel. Ron had said make everything the same, so they did, tunnel and all.

Ron got a big break on a cabin. He would have had to wait 60 days or more if he took a cabin identical to Ray's, but the manufacturer had one the same size with a different window treatment and slightly different floor plan.

It had been sitting around for some time because the customer's loan had fallen through and it had some fancy options like a wet bar and designer kitchen. They told Ron that they had to unload the home and that if he could pay cash, they could deliver it in two weeks and begin the assembly.

That was too good of a deal for Ron to pass up and the timing was perfect. He told them he'd have his bank wire the money. Ron was a very successful insurance agent and sold auto, casualty and life insurance. Just his residuals on the life insurance alone would put Jennifer through College and Medical School.

Some of the casualty policies paid a residual as long as the customer just paid the renewal notice, too. They had a pretty tidy sum put away and forking out that cash came easy. Besides, with Jennifer's scholarship to Brown, he hadn't had to hit the annuity he'd bought to pay for her college and there was the money from their home in Jackson.

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The terrorists had wanted to strike on the anniversary of their previous attack, but the Department of Homeland Security, anticipating that something could happen on the anniversary raised the threat level to Orange. No sweat, they just moved the attack on the water supply to Columbus Day. That particular holiday was one that wasn't universally celebrated, but with this attack they needed a little less traffic in the big cities to get to the water supplies so it was ideal.

When nothing happened around Labor Day, the threat level went back to yellow and the terrorists were ready to go. The first attack had been more of an inconvenience than anything else. Some people had died when they lost power for their medical equipment but the death toll hadn't been overly alarming. More people died in the riots that followed in the continuing outage than directly as a result of the outage. This attack would be different. Millions should die if the reason for the deaths weren't discovered too quickly.

Columbus Day was a controversial holiday too. As one author put it, "The United States honors only two men with federal holidays bearing their names. In January we commemorate the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr., who struggled to lift the blinders of racial prejudice and to cut the remaining bonds of slavery in America. In October, we honor Christopher Columbus, who opened the Atlantic slave trade and launched one of the greatest waves of genocide known in history."

The terrorists had a variety of poisons, Ricin being but one of many. In the very early morning hours of October 12, 2006, they introduced the poisons into the water systems of hundreds of major cities. It wasn't until late morning that the scope of the problem became apparent and it wasn't until late evening that the problem was localized down to the water supply.

By this time, whole populations had been poisoned. Not everyone got a fatal dose, however, because oral intake of ricin requires a heavy dose. The Department of Homeland Security and the Oval Office moved with haste to shut off water supplies and announced the danger. It was October and parts of the US had already had the first and some their second snowstorm.

Parts of the country were experiencing subfreezing temperatures. This made it very difficult to resolve the problem. First the water systems had to be tested. Then if anything were found they had to be flushed and retested. Some cities went through several cycles of flushing and retesting.

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Out in Jackson Hole at the acreage, the people were unaffected by the event, at least directly. However, Mike and Bill were in Cheyenne, Jennifer was in Providence and Ryan was at the Academy. Fortunately none of those places were affected by the attacks. However, there were some anxious moments until everyone called home to assure the families that they were safe.

Around the country, the dying wasn't over. The terrorists had even employed the "luminous toxin" (Phosphorus) with no antidote made famous by the motion picture DOA made in 1950 and remade in 1988. Some of them were after all studying chemical engineering and they found great humor in employing that particular poison. Depending upon which movie you'd seen, you had a week to live or 3 days to live.

The operative phrase was with no antidote. When cases began to surface of people poisoned with this particular toxin, it took a whole new round of phone calls to reassure the parents. The hypochondriacs were having a field day too, burdening the hospitals insisting that they were victims of the mysterious toxin. It turned out that very few people had ingested the toxin, but the effects of its use were dramatic.

Ray and Stacy, Scott and Susan and Ron and Rosemary were gathered around Ray and Stacy's table. They did that a lot because Ray and Stacy's home was located between the other two.

"I don't like this one dang bit," Scott said. "We've been attacked twice now by terrorists. Three times if you go back to 2001. The 2005 attack didn't kill a lot of people. But this attack did. And, I'd venture to say that Ray might agree with me if I were to suggest that we ain't seen nothing yet."

"I'd use better English than that," Ray half laughed, "But I do agree with Scott. Either we're going to see nuclear weapons, or God help us, a biological attack."

"Which seems more likely?" Stacy asked.

"If I were a betting man, babe, I'd put my money on a biological attack," Ray replied.

"Why biological?" Ron asked.

"Well," Ray started, "A lot of military organizations around the world developed biological weapons. Usually they're cheap to produce. Often the antidote has to be specifically engineered for the bacterium or virus. Take the Ebola Zaire virus for example; there is no antidote for it. And, if half the stories are true, there are a lot more engineered viruses out there than some of the simple stuff like Anthrax.

"Anthrax is no big deal. Remember the cases after 9/11? Very few people died because we could counteract Anthrax with Cipro. There are probably hundreds, even thousands of deadly little viruses just waiting to be discovered. They don't call these things the poor man's atom bomb for nothing. I remember reading an article a while back on the web.

"In April 1998, there was a little-noticed simulated chemical gas attack in the Orange Bowl. Miami was one of 120 cities tested by the Department of Defense. The purpose: to determine if authorities could efficiently and quickly handle a biochemical terrorist attack. The conclusion: they could not.

"Recently, Chuck Lanza, the director of Miami-Dade's Emergency Management Office said, 'If terrorists can get a biological agent, they can disperse it in this community without much difficulty.'

"Attorney General John Ashcroft said individuals with possible links to the terrorist hijackers who destroyed the World Trade Center received or tried to obtain licenses to transport explosive and poisonous hazardous materials.

"As *Germ*s, the first book to investigate this dilemma thoroughly, warns, *we remain woefully unprepared for a calamity that would be unlike any this country has ever experienced.* The authors - New York Times reporters Judith Miller and William Broad along with editor Stephen Engelberg - chillingly report that *the government has quietly concluded that the United States is all but defenseless against the rising threat of an attack with germ weapons.*

"This is no *the sky is falling* treatise quickly written to scare the daylights out of readers. It is a careful, methodical analysis of a problem that has worried experts since World War II and how such fears were ignored or covered up by military leaders and top federal officials, including presidents.

“In 1994, after being warned by leading biologist Josh Lederberg that the Clinton administration wasn’t doing enough to defend the United States against germ weapons, national security adviser Anthony Lake asked, *Do I really have to worry about this? I’ve got enough on my plate.*”

“Before he left office, Clinton asked Congress for \$2.8 billion in the 2001 budget to fight *germ warriors*. He wanted most of that money to prepare state and city emergency planners, because in 2000, just \$315 million of the \$8.4 billion allocated for counterterrorism was spent to help local governments prepare for a biological or chemical attack.

“As for the rest of the money, *Germs* claims that just 6 percent was used to strengthen the disastrously inadequate public health system, the heart of a meaningful biodefense. The vast majority was spent inside the Washington beltway *on whistles and sirens, fancy cars, faulty germ detectors and other marginal equipment.*”

“*Germs* reviews how the United States fell far behind in the bioweapons race after signing a nonproliferation treaty with the Soviet Union, which promptly began to make the weapons secretly until it had stockpiled tons of anthrax, small pox, botulinum and bubonic plague, most of which disappeared after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

“While not so thorough as *Biohazard* by the Soviet program’s former No. 2 man Ken Alibek, *Germs* does contain new charges that the Soviets tested germs on humans. It also maintains that the CIA and the Pentagon violated the treaty with secret programs of their own.

“The authors also reveal how the Iraqi biological weapons program was given a boost by a Maryland scientific supply company with the world’s largest collection of killer germ strains. With a license routinely obtained from the Commerce Department, the company sold an assortment of the lethal germs to the University of Baghdad in 1986.

“The book masterfully spells out in frustrating detail the nonstop battle within the Pentagon over whether troops should be inoculated against biological agents. It also recounts a bizarre episode involving Cuba in the 1960s when the United States had an active biological warfare operation at Ft. Detrick, Md. Military planners deny it, but the program’s former scientific director Riley Housewright says his scientists ‘prepared agents that could incapacitate or kill large numbers of Cubans.’ The scheme was never implemented.

“Is the threat of germ weapons real or exaggerated? The authors say it is both. Senior officials have occasionally overstated the present danger. There have only been a handful of biological attacks; none was catastrophic. Yet the threat is real, because scientific discoveries are making the possibility of such attacks easier. An estimated 25 countries have active biological weapons programs, and terrorists are bent on getting their hands on what some call the *poor man’s atom bomb.*”

“Plans should be prepared for adequate laboratory and vaccine production facilities and stockpiles of medical supplies (if) enemy attacks appear imminent. That recommendation was made to Secretary of Defense James Forrestal in 1949. It could have been written yesterday.”

“On the other hand,” Ray continued. “Nuclear weapons are expensive and carefully guarded.”

“I thought that I’d heard that the Russians had several missing nuclear weapons and that bin Laden had bought them.” Ron countered.

“Maybe so Ron,” Ray replied, “But imagine how much easier it would be to sneak in a biological weapon than an atom bomb.”

“I see your point,” Ron acknowledged.

“Let’s take Ray’s point a step further,” Scott suggested. “How many cities were hit with these toxins, a few hundred? That would suggest that there are a few hundred terrorists that the feds can’t seem to find. Pick any number you want, 500, 750 or 1,000. It would only take one person with some virus that nobody has a cure for to start a pandemic. Now, what if all of them had the virus? They could kill off half the world before we developed an antibody against the virus, assuming we could develop an antibody.”

By this time the three women at the table and Ron were frightened. Really, really frightened.

“Is that why you built that shelter of yours Ray?” Ron asked.

“Exactly Ron,” Ray said nodding. “What are the odds of us getting hit with a nuke? I’ll answer that, Slim and None. On the other hand, a biological weapon could spread on the wind. That’s why the fancy air filtration system. And, as long as I was building a shelter, I figured I might just as well protect my family against Slim, too, that’s why it’s an underground shelter.”

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The terrorists had their biological weapon, but Tehran urged that they wait until the Iranian scientists developed an antibody against the weapon. They were afraid that if the weapon were released, it could wipe out the population of the entire world. Not everyone, it seems, wanted to martyr themselves in the name of Allah. There was no rush, the second phase had worked because they had waited and all of them had at least two more years at the American Universities.

Let the Great Satan worry and wonder when the next attack would come. This virus they had had surfaced in Africa and had it not been for an alert Iraqi doctor, would have probably stayed in Africa. There had been a tiny outbreak that quickly killed a family and

the virus had not spread. The Iraqi doctor had been called in to examine the bodies and he had taken blood samples and ordered the bodies burned. There was no record of the virus anywhere.

The kids weren't coming home for Christmas this year either. Ryan was going to spend his leave with Jen up in Providence. He had said he might take her down to New York City to see a play or a show. By this time Stacy had given up telling him to be careful. These kids of theirs were pretty level headed and if they got one hotel room rather than two, she wouldn't know it anyway. Besides, she figured, Ryan was over halfway done at West Point; he'd never do anything to interfere with his graduating.

That discussion of Ray and Scott's had chilled Stacy to the bone. What if terrorists let loose a biological weapon on the US? They ought to be safe enough here in Jackson Hole, what with the shelter and everything they'd done to prepare, but what about Ryan and Jennifer?

For that matter what about Mike and Bill? A virus could infect someone and if they were an air traveler, it might be all over the country before anyone even discovered it. Scott's comment, "They could kill off half the world before we developed an antibody against the virus, assuming we could develop an antibody," was particularly troubling. She hoped and prayed that they were wrong.

Scott and Ray had all of their firewood gathered and split before Ron and Rosemary's cabin had been completed. Since Ron couldn't help, they decided to just split their firewood up and supply Ron with wood for this year. Maybe next year they could get Bill and Mike to help them get in the firewood. Ray had been sitting pretty with 16 cords on hand before they started this year. He had added a dozen cords. Scott had four cords and he built this supply to 16 cords.

So, they hauled ten cords over to Ron's and stacked the wood. One of the nice things about these cabins was that you could stack at least a cord of wood inside on either side of the fireplace. You could also stack 16 cords on the front porch, assuming you filled the porch. Ray had his 2 cords in the Great Room, sixteen cords on the porch and 2 cords stacked next to the shed. At least when Ray gave the 8 cords to Ron, you could see Ray's shed. Scott added 2 cords to Ray's 8.

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They were now rotating food out of the survival supplies and replenishing them from Walton Feed. They sort of blended in the rotated survival food with the food stored in their basements and used the stuff up. None of them was totally sure how long they could store that survival food, so why take a chance?

When they actually got into the stuff from Walton, it was in good shape, so they probably need not have bothered, but better safe than sorry. Even with three cabins on the

acreage they hadn't needed a lot of propane. They hadn't run the generators except to exercise them and the solar water heaters kept the propane usage to a minimum.

The six of them had essentially formed two rifle teams, the men's team and the women's team. Rosemary had never shot a firearm before and it took her several weeks to get up to speed. Susan had been well taught by Scott after she'd seen Stacy shoot and she and Stacy shot well enough to cover for Rosemary some of the time.

The men were still ahead in the informal competition, but Rosemary was coming along. Give her a few months more shooting practice and the men would be singing the blues. Between Stacy and Susan, it was virtually an even draw, and one never knew on any given day which of them would shoot better than the other.

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At Brown, Jennifer's lab assistant internship had turned into a regular part time lab assistant's job. She seemed to have such a flair for microbiology. Ryan was part of the Black Knights, the USMA shooting team. He had expected to shoot a center fire rifle, but wasn't disappointed when it turned out that the team emphasized air rifle and the 50 meter .22 competition. It really didn't matter; shooting a rifle was shooting a rifle, regardless of the caliber. And, he had to admit; those weapons the Black Knights used didn't have any of the recoil of his .300 Winchester Magnum.

And while we're on the subject of Ryan and Jennifer, regardless of what anyone else might think, they had managed to keep their hands mostly to themselves, remaining a Lady and a Gentleman. It hadn't been easy for either of them; Jennifer was drop dead gorgeous and Ryan was pretty much a hunk.

The last time Ryan had talked to Hazel before she'd passed away, he had made her a promise and he was going to keep that promise. Jennifer wanted to wait too. There was so much pressure in society in the last half of the decade to chuck the morality and go for it. But, she had certain expectations of herself and she wasn't going to disappoint herself or the man she loved.

The Professor that Jennifer assisted was very impressed with her and had arranged for a summer internship at the NCID in Atlanta between her junior and senior year. That was the preferred step prior to her planned year in Africa. And, if that year in Africa worked out, Jennifer had a good chance at a Scholarship for Medical School.

Ryan would be busy all summer too, spending the first half at air assault school at Ft. Smith and the second half back at West Point instructing at *Camp Buckner*. Maybe they could see each other while he was at Ft. Smith. But first, they had to get through the second semester of their junior year.

The scientists in Iraq had so far been unable to come up with an antibody to combat the

virus brought back from Africa. Neither had the Iranians in Tehran. What good was the weapon if it stood to kill off the entire world? They were in a dilemma of immense proportions. They probably shouldn't have sent the virus off to America until they had developed the antibody. But, it had made sense at the time.

The US hadn't been expecting an attack, per se, so they were able to smuggle in small amounts undetected. They had been so sure at the time that they would have an antibody. The terrorists would just have to wait to unleash the weapon.

They wanted the antibody not only for themselves but also for the Russians and the Chinese. Can you imagine how they would react to being attacked by a virus for which they had no cure? Why, they would probably track down the culprit and unleash their nuclear horror. No, the terrorists would have to wait.

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That discussion about viruses got Ray to thinking about his air filtration system. Well that meant search the net one more time. He happened across the IQAir Cleanroom Series H13 air purifiers, which were suitable for removing microorganisms and other particle contaminants in home, office, or medical areas such as infectious control units. These air purifiers provided very fast clean air delivery rates at high speed with almost 100% air particle removal.

They were especially useful for critical filtration of microorganisms, viruses, and bacteria in up to 1200 sq. feet areas. They were also the most common air purifiers found in European hospitals, but were suited for residential and commercial environments as well. With extremely long filter life, these air purifiers are easy to use – HEPA filters can last up to 4.5 years, and pre-filters last from 1-2 years. (note: can last)

This air purifier used the same technology as the IQAir Healthpro, and it worked by taking in air from the bottom of the unit, passing the air through the pre-filter, then through the fan, then through the HEPA filter media, and venting the clean air out of the sides just below the top of the unit.

The IQAir Cleanroom H13 unit had an air intake, air outlet diffuser, pre-filter, a HEPA filter, and a high-performance centrifugal fan to ensure maximum clean air delivery. All of the IQAir systems had a set of advanced controls for monitoring each filter's useful life and air quality. He would have to modify the intake system, to use the outside air, but this was the unit for him.

Since the unit circulated the air from a 1,200 square foot room 1.6 times per hour, he guessed that one unit would be enough for the shelter. The unit was about three steps up from what he had installed. The filter unit was expensive at \$1,600, but what was the price of a human life?

Mountain Man – Chapter 17 – The Lull

Of course, not all of the terrorists agreed with Tehran, but the Mullahs were determined to maintain absolute control of the operation. They had sent about a dozen people with special training just to enforce their wishes. Those very few who disagreed with their decision to wait on the attack were counseled. Most agreed after a visit from the counselors.

The last holdouts insisted that they were going to deliver their packages because they had waited long enough. They were given a one-way ticket to Paradise. Or, would it be more descriptive to say that they became the examples of what happened to someone who wouldn't follow orders? One had a car accident and the other mysteriously fell from the balcony of his off-campus housing unit, a truly regrettable tragedy.

Once more America slowly returned to normal. The news media managed to milk the terrorist acts for all they were worth. They suggested a dozen or more theories of who was behind the terrorism. One of them actually hit the nail right on the head, but the FBI Director dismissed his assertions because the FBI had done exhaustive background checks on anyone who had entered the US in the period between the US withdrawal from the Middle East and when the attacks had begun.

That turned into a Congressional investigation and sparked another set of hearings. One more time the Director of the FBI, the Director of the CIA, the Secretary of Homeland Security and scores of midlevel functionaries were called to testify. They basically ended up blaming it on Bush. It wasn't clear in their 2,300-page report of their findings just what Bush had done wrong, but Bill O'Reilly on *The Factor* suggested that it must have been because he started the war on terrorism in the first place.

Moreover, the Senate hearing concluded that Bush had withheld information from Kerry, exonerating President Kerry. The conclusions of the Senate Hearings had popular support because the 9/11 Commission had essentially found that Bush was guilty of not reading the 19 terrorists minds. They didn't say it that way, of course, but that was the real substance of their findings. Bush was President in 2001 and his intelligence agencies didn't get along with each other due to his poor leadership. They kept secrets from each other.

With Kerry having won the election and the Democrats having regained control in the House and Senate, everything was Bush's fault and Bush should have listened to that great Democratic President Clinton.

Harry Truman was turning over in his grave, although with inflation, Truman's Buck was only worth a dime. Old *give 'em hell Harry*, was a relic of an earlier time. Given the state of our education system, probably the only people who knew about him and his famous expression, *the buck stops here* were historians or lived in rest homes. Any kid who had heard the name probably thought MacArthur fired Truman. On top of that, no one brought up that Bill Clinton had refused to allow bin Laden to be taken out.

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Ryan called and he was angry and embarrassed. It seemed that he'd gotten it wrong, the air assault school was at Camp Smith, not Ft. Smith. He had assumed it was Ft. Smith, Georgia as opposed to Ft. Smith, Arkansas or Ft. Smith, Montana. Camp Smith was in NEW YORK! And, like Camp Buckner, which was a real place, but more of an institution than a place, Camp Smith was in some out-of-the way rural New York location and more of an institution than a place.

The 101st would send a training team up from Ft. Campbell to provide the instruction. Stacy told Ryan not to worry about it. He was going to Camp Smith or Ft. Smith or wherever to learn, not lollygag over Jennifer.

Besides, Jennifer would probably be so busy in Atlanta that they wouldn't have had any time together anyway. Ray talked to Ryan for just a minute. He told Ryan that he was probably in for a lot more surprises before he finished up. Yeah, Ryan agreed, like those air rifles and the .22's. That short exchange had made Ryan feel a whole lot better. The holidays came and went for another year.

Rosemary was getting pretty good with both a rifle and a handgun. The women were regularly beating the men at the informal competition. These weren't a bunch of teenagers with 20/15 vision who could see a 1" bullseye at 400-yards with their naked eye, but God help anyone they threw down on. Except for the sniper rifles, all of the shooting was done at 100-yards for rifle and 50' for handguns. Ray and Scott had come up with some used web gear too, but the ladies didn't much care for it, especially Stacy. Those darn straps hit them in the wrong place on the chest.

Let's return to Ryan for a moment. During the spring of his cow (junior) year Ryan participated in the Sandhurst Competition. Ryan was his company's best marksman. He was assigned the task of assembling an M60 from a bucket of parts. He was faster than anyone at West Point.

Sandhurst is the name of the British military academy, which always sent 2 teams each year to join in competing against 1 team from each of the 40 companies at West Point and various ROTC teams from across the US and the Canadian Military Academy. The Navy used to send a team, but they couldn't do well, so they quit coming! Sandhurst was a series of military challenges, something on the order of the ranger challenge. Ryan had high hopes of duplicating the feat during his firstie (senior) year.

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Ron was as fit as a fiddle and seemed to insist that the doctor had been wrong to force him into retirement. No longer bound to a chair, he was getting a lot more exercise and, of course, took his pills religiously. Between the two things, Ron was probably in the best physical condition that he had been since his Corp days.

He had quit smoking, too. The doctor hadn't been wrong and his prediction that Ron could live to a ripe old age had been right on. Usually men who had experienced a mild heart attack picked right up where they left off. Had Ron done that, he would have long been dead and buried.

Snowmobiling became a favorite pastime of our approaching senior set. They went on daylong treks, exploring the foothills of the Teton Range. What there were of foothills, that is. Life was good in early 2007, and they were in a lull in terrorist activities. America was beginning to get soft again. The Saudis kept pumping the high volume of cheap oil and a lot of people dusted off the SUV's or bought good used ones for a song and began to burn gasoline at record rates.

By midsummer, while Ryan was at Camp Smith and Jennifer was in Atlanta, Americans were planning all sorts of outings with their SUV's. The Arabs had America's throat in a vice grip and the Americans didn't even know it.

Ray's poor old F-100 finally bit the dust. It was a 1959 or 1960 pickup and parts were hard to come by. Ray decided it was time to move up in the world and he took the old Ford to the junkyard and spent big bucks on a newer diesel pickup. He had a set of extended range, after market fuel tanks added to the pickup while he was at it. The pickup was fire engine red and he promised himself to let Stacy drive it, someday.

It was a long bed, 6-passenger pickup, and quite a departure from the 3-passenger, faded blue F-100. It had all of the whistles and toots, too; 4 wheel drive, a big, diesel guzzling engine, radio and CD player, well, just everything.

The newer pickup caused Ray to rethink the diesel situation and he put in an 8,000-gallon underground diesel tank and reverted the 100-gallon tank to gasoline storage. They now had 400 gallons of gasoline and 8,000 gallons of diesel. The Dodge happened to have a Cummins 6BT engine. Ray had no clue how that might become important.

The little community was a friendly place. Ray kept the propane tank full and billed the cost of the propane, pro-rata, to Scott and Ron. Only Stacy used the above ground gas tank. The diesel was dispensed through a pump and everyone wrote down his or her usage and Ray billed the cost of the diesel pro-rata, too.

Water was free. It didn't cost Ray anything because he had set up additional used electrical panels on top of the water tank to generate electricity for the well pump and the discharge pump. He wrote the panels off on his taxes through a for-profit, subchapter S corporation. He also depreciated the water tank and the LP tank and since the real estate development corporation's only income was expense reimbursement, it was a perpetual loss.

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A lull in terrorists' activities is a good thing, right? It was for the President and the Democrats who controlled Congress. First they repealed all of Bush's tax cuts. Then they reversed course on his no child left behind initiative, any child could graduate from High School if he or she could spell his or her name, within 3 tries. (That was still tough on a few kids.)

Then, after a long period of debate, they implemented national health care and paid for it with an 8% federal sales tax. Finally, they got around to the Assault Weapons Ban that Bush had allowed to sunset. They couldn't garner enough support to add much to the previous ban and had to settle on re-implementing the previous ban and adding additional definitions.

Semi-automatic firearms were still legal, but with the exception of Law Enforcement and Military, the new standard was a 7-round, rather than a 10-round magazine. They had settled on a 7-round magazine because the M1911 pistol used a 7-round magazine. One other little thing, they eliminated the pre-ban provisions. The NRA was suing.

Jennifer had shined down in Atlanta at the NICD. She was a first rate microbiologist, though only a junior. She would make a first rate physician, too. She had been allowed, briefly, to work in the level-four facilities and was familiar with all kinds of bacteria and viruses.

She was doing better than Ryan in college, maintaining her straight-A average. She had been accepted to medical school too, and would start when she returned from Africa.

Ryan, perhaps because he didn't have Jennifer's help, could only manage to stay in the top 2% of his class. Still, considering all of his other accomplishments at West Point, it was very, very respectable. During his 'firstie' (senior) year, Ryan was made the company commander of company F2.

At the acreage, Ron helped Ray and Scott gather firewood. They worked long and hard at it and the woodpiles were huge. Mike and Bill helped, too. It had consumed most of the summer of 2007. Ray hadn't wanted to scratch the paint on his newly painted pickup and had taken it back into Jackson and had a body liner installed in the bed.

All three cabins had two cords of wood stacked inside, sixteen cords of wood on the porch and several more cords stacked next to the sheds by fall. Maybe the men felt this was their last hurrah, who knows? In future years they could content themselves just replacing the wood that they had burned during the winter months.

The Iranian scientists thought they were getting close to an antibody for their killer virus. They counseled patience to the terrorists in American and advised them to all attend Graduate School if the antibody wasn't ready by the time their finished their 4-year educations at the Universities.

In fact, they were getting closer to an effective antibody, but it wouldn't come for a while. The upside of the whole thing was that America had reduced the threat level first to Blue, or Guarded, and finally to Green, or Low. America was busy rehabilitating its aged electrical infrastructure and it would be modern and impervious, or nearly so by 2009. The water utilities had implemented additional safeguards on the water system, too and the retrofitting was expected to be completed by the fall of 2008.

President Kerry had one other item on his agenda, a National Identity Card System (NIDCS) to protect against further terrorist attacks. A federally mandated system had been worked out using the Smart Cards. They would contain large amounts of data and would include not only the cardholders' fingerprints, but also retinal scans and DNA information.

The system was to be implemented at the state level using the states Departments of Motor Vehicles or whoever was responsible for issuing Driver's Licenses. It was a multi-billion dollar program. Funding for the program would come, in part, by a further reduction of the US Armed Forces to 8 Carriers and a broad cutting of the military from a 10-Division Army to a 7-Division Army. After all, wasn't the US enjoying the greatest period of peace in history?

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The states were all but overwhelmed by the new NIDCS. There was a shortage of DNA labs to process the DNA information. The DNA analysis mandated by Congress was expensive and took time; time that they didn't have.

Sure, the feds covered the cost of the DNA analysis by imposing a high fee on the cost of the mandatory NIDCS, but not everyone could afford the high fee and it fell on the state legislatures to pick up the slack and the increased personnel costs. They did that by making deep cuts in education. Well why not, all you had to be able to do was spell your name to be able to graduate and they gave you three chances to get it right?

Crime was suddenly up too as a generation of ignorant youngsters began to graduate from High School. Unable to get jobs because they couldn't read, write or compute, the young people began to resort to criminal activities to pay for the food and shelter they needed to live.

The children of the privileged few attended private schools on a more frequent basis, reducing class room sizes in public schools and allowing the state legislatures to make even deeper cuts. It was a slow trend, but it was building up a head of steam. A lot of young people were unemployed or under employed, not because they weren't willing workers, but because they weren't employable. Somewhere, though, the states managed to come up with money for more prisons.

Scott, Ray and Ron were alarmed by what they were seeing happening to the country. There was nothing they could do about it, but it scared the bejeezus out of them. Nei-

ther were they convinced that the US was living in the greatest period of peace in history. They didn't back off their preparations for one minute. There were new residents at the acreage, too. Michael and Nancy built a cabin, much like the others.

Michael was between Stacy and Ray in age and Mike was coming back after graduation to take over the ranch. Michael was getting rheumatoid arthritis and it was becoming harder for him to manage. Ranching had been good to Michael and Nancy and they'd raised and sold their share of expensive Arabian horseflesh over the years. Michael had a few ranch hands and they took care of things in his absence.

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Didn't the time fly! It was holiday season again. Jennifer and Ryan surprised them by showing up for Christmas. Ryan wanted to talk to Ray and Stacy about the graduation exercises this coming spring and his plans after graduation. He was planning on going to Infantry Officer's Basic School (IOBC) back at Fort Benning and then to Ranger School. Ryan expected Ray and Stacy to be there for graduation. And Ron and Rosemary, too for the wedding.

He had already talked to the Chaplin and reserved their slot for the wedding in the Protestant Chapel. Several of his close friends would form the Honor Guard for Jennifer and he to pass through after the wedding. Of course there was the Sandhurst Competition again this spring and Ryan was all but becoming a legend on the shooting team. (All West Point Sports Teams are Black Knights.)

Jennifer had picked out her wedding dress and had paid for it herself with the money she was earning as a lab assistant. Everything was set for her year in Zaire, too. She still didn't have a scholarship totally pinned down for Medical School, but several opportunities were in the offing.

Jennifer was going to be a beautiful bride. She showed Rosemary and Stacy photos of the gown she had picked out and paid for. It was so elegant. Rosemary was beginning to look forward to the wedding as all mothers do and Stacy had to admit that she was too.

Her son was quite the man and, she reflected, the spitting image of his father. It was a real shame that Ryan Sr., David and Rose and Roy and Hazel wouldn't be there to see Ryan graduate from West Point and see Ron walk Jennifer down the aisle.

Ray was really glad to see Ryan and Jennifer, but he was distracted. He had that old feeling burning in his gut one more time. The downside of that was that it came on so early, usually long before TSHTF. By this time he was totally convinced that the terrorists were going to strike one more time.

What would the country be like, he wondered, after that attack came? Would millions be killed? Would the inmates break out of the prisons and ravage the land? Would all of

those gangster kids spread out and attack the country? He had no answers to any of those questions, but he sure did have that sinking feeling in his gut. One thing was certain, America had gone from the frying pan into the fire when they had elected John Kerry and put the Democrats back in power in the Congress.

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Ron, Scott and Ray all hoped that the rumors were true. Scuttlebutt had it that Colin Powell might finally run for President. Now, there was a man they could vote for! Not everyone around the country probably felt as they did about Powell, but even as Secretary of State under Bush, Powell had done his very best to maintain his integrity. It hadn't been easy with a man like Bush in the White House, but in their opinions, he'd managed to do it.

If he did decide to announce, it would be an uphill battle all of the way. With the liberals back in power in the country, a decent, honest man like Powell had a fight on his hands. His being black would get him some of the minority vote and some of the liberal vote; but it could cost him some of the Republican vote. Politics were becoming stranger by the moment.

In fact, Alma Powell, who had persuaded him not to run in 2000, had half relented. Rather than go up against a difficult to defeat President Kerry in 2008, she would go along with his running for President if he waited until 2012. He might be older, she said, but hadn't Ronald Reagan been President when he was older than dirt?

Colin, ever the dutiful husband, and believing that John Kerry's record as President would make him, Powell, a virtual shoo-in in 2012, agreed with his wife. Ray, Scott and Ron were extremely disappointed when Powell made his announcement that he would not seek the 2008 Republican Presidential nomination. Ray muttered something about hoping that they and Powell were still around in 2012.

Ray, in particular, despised John Kerry. Kerry had gone to Vietnam, earned some medals that meant something and then had come home and disgraced himself, his medals, his uniform and his country by giving back his ribbons. The election back in 2004 had been quite the sideshow. Kerry had said that giving back the ribbons wasn't the same as giving back the medals.

Then, he had claimed that he hadn't given back his ribbons, but someone else's. He had made other claims, too, but as far as Ray was concerned that Kerry was one traitorous son-of-a-bitch. It was a testament to Ray's fortitude that Ray could even stand to listen to the President making those announcements on TV. Kerry, Ray thought, ought to be locked up in Leavenworth in a cell with Hanoi Jane, they deserved each other.

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Spring came in the blink of an eye. The four of them were off to New York, first they would catch Jennifer's graduation in Providence, and then the whole entourage would move on to West Point for Graduation Week festivities. Stacy and Ray were invited to an awards ceremony during graduation week where Ryan received an award for being the cadet who most exemplifies what West Point stands for duty, honor, country.

Ryan also received an award for being the outstanding marksman on the rifle team. Stacy shed tears as they called Ryan's name and hometown as he proudly led his company of 100 cadets across the hallowed parade field known as "The Plain".

To tell the truth, Ray was having a pretty tough job keeping a dry eye himself. It was one of those occasions where Ray dug out and proudly wore his uniform. He wanted the honor and privilege of being one of the first to salute Ryan.

The military wedding was going to be the source of a lifetime of memories. Ryan in his full dress uniform and those shiny new 2nd Lieutenant bars, Jennifer in that elegant gown; and the two of them running through the gauntlet of swords raised in their honor. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

The reception, held at a local hotel had been Ray's treat. But it had been over all too soon and Ryan and Jennifer were off on a honeymoon. After that, Ryan was off to IOBC and Jennifer to Africa. Because of her excellent background in microbiology and her internship at NIDC, Jennifer was assigned to work in a lab analyzing microbial, bacterial and viral samples.

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Jennifer went to Africa on a medical missionary program after getting her biology degree. A family had died and the local medical authorities had immediately become concerned. They used level 4 containment procedures and took samples before burning the bodies. The samples were sent to the lab where Jennifer was working for analysis. She couldn't come up with anything in the microscope, so it must be a virus. Well, that fit the symptoms better than a bacterium anyway.

She was able to isolate the virus in an electron microscope. There was something awfully familiar about it. She checked her notes from the internship at NIDC. There it was, right there in her notes. That was strange; she had found a dangerous communicable disease in the folks that was not supposed to be in that part of Africa.

She scanned the image into her laptop computer and contacted the NIDC. The doctors kept telling her that the virus was not in that part of Africa. Finally, in frustration she forwarded the image from her computer to the NIDC as a jpeg attachment to an email. They told her they would get back to her.

A few hours later, someone was shaking Jennifer awake. She had an urgent phone call from the NIDC. She threw on a robe and got to the phone. She had been right, she was

told. A jet was in the air headed to Africa to pick her and the virus samples up. They were sorry to interrupt her African service, but she was needed in Atlanta. Get around, they told her; the plane would arrive in a few hours.

Although the NIDC had samples of the virus, they had never done much work on it. Jennifer had been one of the brightest interns they'd ever had and anyone capable of identifying that virus was the person who should do the work to help develop an antibody. While the plane made its way first to and then back from Africa, they assembled a team, which included some of their best and brightest minds.

Hours later when an exhausted Jennifer arrived back in the US; they immediately set about developing an antibody for the virus. It took them three months, but they had succeeded in developing an antibody. In the process, Jennifer had established her credentials and had gotten that Medical School Scholarship.

President Kerry was faced with the biggest dilemma of his Presidency. He had just won reelection, but it was almost by default, the Republicans hadn't put forth a viable candidate. The CDC, more specifically the NIDC, had identified a virus in Africa that wasn't supposed to be in that part of Africa.

They had developed an antibody after three months of hard work. The NIDC was suggesting that the virus had great potential as a terrorist weapon and was urging the President to prepare vast supplies of the antibody and vaccinate the entire US population. It took time to produce the antibody they told him, start now!

The population of the US, give or take, was about 280 million. They estimated that it would take 2 years to produce 280 million doses of the vaccine. Kerry got the ball rolling, but then had the most unpleasant task of determining who would receive the vaccine. The lives of millions of people were in his hands and John Kerry made a fateful decision.

The first to be vaccinated would be the military, and federal and state government workers. Next came the providers of essential services, like the medical services. After that, they would vaccinate all children under the age of 18. After that, they would formally announce the 'flu' vaccine and force the remainder of the population to receive mandatory vaccinations.

Her temporary service to the government completed and her scholarship guaranteed, Jennifer was going to return to Africa. She had received an immunization. Somehow, an additional 11 doses of the vaccine just happened to end up in a vial in her purse.

She went to Ft. Benning to see Ryan first and insisted he take an injection of a new vaccine, trust her, she had asked. Then she was off to Jackson. She rounded up the four couples and her two cousins and gave them injections of the new vaccine.

She never gave a satisfactory explanation, but she was the smart one and had gotten herself a scholarship to med school. The one remaining dose went to Mike's new wife, Crystal. They never once questioned her. "Dang," Stacy thought, "I used to look like that. Once." [Folks: Stacy still looked pretty damned good!]

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Anyway, Stacy had begun to remember Ryan's third summer at the academy when he had gone to Ft. Benning to attend Jump School. She had gotten more and more nervous about airborne as Ryan's time at Ft. Benning got closer. Ray figured that it would be best to take her to see her son. They flew into Atlanta, picked up Jennifer, and then drove down I-85 and I-185 to Columbus. It was only about a 90-minute drive. Ray had spent a little time at Ft. Benning himself seeing as this was the home of the infantry!

Ray wore his jump wings above his ribbons. He showed Stacy where he'd stayed and received some of his own training. Ray had gone through ranger school at Ft. Benning, and then graduated ranger school at Ft. Benning. Ray, Stacy and Jennifer would watch one of the required jumps from the stands. Ray remembered how hot and humid Georgia was and had brought plenty of water, sunglasses and an umbrella to protect the three of them from the sun.

They saw the large planes fly over and watched as suddenly numerous black dots emerged from the rear of the plane. (Someone commented that it looked like a guppy having little babies.) The airborne instructors were shouting instructions through bullhorns into the air as the air filled with parachutes.

Several times 2 chutes would become tangled and a gasp would go up from among the parents followed by quietly but sincerely offered up prayers. Each wondered if that were their child (even though these paratroopers to be were definitely not children) eventually by kicking and causing themselves to rotate, they would get untangled and come to earth safely.

Ray noticed the ambulance sitting at the far edge of the field and hoped that Jennifer and Stacy didn't notice it. Just before hitting the ground the paratroopers would release their heavy bag of equipment, which was essentially between their legs. The bag would hit the ground first reducing the weight on the parachute for a few seconds. Stacy stood with Ray and Jennifer watching through binoculars trying to pick out Ryan.

The instructors were energetically giving "correction" as the paratroopers were "loudly instructed" to run across the huge fields carrying their huge packs and parachutes. Stacy saw Ryan finally and laughed and cried, because she was so proud of her son, even though she could tell he was so physically drained. Jennifer managed to get the first hug, however. The same thing occurred at graduation. Yes, she recalled, that had been quite the trip.

The jump, the prayers, the run, and then the paratroopers hung up their chutes. Then they stood in formation for what seemed like hours. How could they maintain that position in this heat and humidity in those heavy battle dress uniforms (BDUs)? But they did! Then there were a couple of short speeches. Ray had been a paratrooper but he'd never before told Stacy.

This was one reason he had a little problem with his knees. The instructors honored the paratroopers in the stands. Ray stood with other "old" paratroopers - and all the parents and guests honored them with their clapping and with their eyes and their hearts. This had been the first time Ray had worn his uniform.

Finally it was time to "pin" the wings on the students. It was now official. Ryan asked that Ray pin on his "wings". Ray was tough; he'd been through a lot. He didn't show his emotions a lot, but he was so proud of Ryan. There was a tear in his eye.

Ryan said, "Thanks for coming; and Dad, thanks for bringing Mom and Jennifer." They got to eat together afterwards.

Stacy asked, "Ryan tell me what it was like."

Ryan answered, "Mom, that plane is so hot, so noisy, guys were getting sick and throwing up, it stunk. Guys were praying. I was scared, so scared. I've now jumped 5 times. Each time I wondered if I would live through the jump. Would the chute open? Was I about to die? The fear was so real; then the jump.

"I was flying through the air; the chute was nearly horizontal. The chute opened with a huge jolt. It was drastic, but then I realized I would LIVE! Mom, it was so beautiful. Life is so wonderful, the earth was so beautiful; I went from one extreme emotionally to the opposite extreme."

Ray had smiled and began to eat watching Ryan, knowing that a man was developing in front of him. A leader of men he later told her. Those were wonderful memories.

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The CDC provided samples of the vaccine and the antibody to numerous countries around the world, mostly US allies, very much on the Q.T. Meanwhile the Iranian scientists made a breakthrough and finally developed a vaccine of their own.

They had hurried the tests of the vaccine, however, succumbing to the pressure of the Mullahs. Their vaccine worked perfectly on one slightly mutated strain of the virus. This mutated stain was not, however, the strain that was hidden away with those Graduate Students in America. The vaccine and word finally went out. Release the virus!

Operating at breakneck speed, the pharmaceutical houses were producing the vaccine faster than expected, much faster. They wanted to be sure the vaccine was safe, however and persuaded the government to vaccinate large scores of prison inmates.

The vaccine that Jennifer had developed was safe and effective and distribution began. Naturally all of the employees of the pharmaceutical houses were vaccinated first. Who would produce the vaccine if they became infected? Then, the President went down his priority list.

First the military was vaccinated; then federal workers were vaccinated; next state governmental workers; next came the providers of essential services; and then the children under the age of 18. Finally, the federal government announced the mandatory 'flu' vaccinations. They were well on the way when the terrorists took the Iranian vaccine and released the virus into the general population.

Mountain Man – Chapter 18 – Pandemic

All things considered, you had to give the President a little credit. His priority list wasn't all that bad. It protected America's security and its future. It did not, however, protect tens of millions of Americans. There actually was almost enough vaccine to protect every American and it was in the hands of the medical professionals.

People who took these things seriously got their vaccinations right away and were safe. As the announcements became more and more alarming about the potential loss of life due to the 'flu' others came forward. The drunks, prostitutes, the infirm and millions of others didn't.

Then the terrorists released the virus. They were the first to die. The virus had a short incubation period and death occurred anywhere from 24 to 72 hours after infection. It depended on the condition of your health, more than anything else. A lot of seniors were used to getting a flu shots every year and they got their shots.

As the news broke that an epidemic seemed to be breaking out a general panic set in and all of the millions of unvaccinated rushed to get in line for their shots. But for some of them it was too late. The vaccine did you no good, in this instance, if you had already been exposed to the virus. Those antibodies needed time to establish a foothold and the virus, if already established, outpaced the antibodies.

Then there were those who couldn't get to a vaccination center because of complications like drunkenness or infirmity. They died. Those hookers knew all about infections and when the word got out about the virus, they rushed to get their shots.

Inmates in most prisons had been protected because of the pharmaceutical houses testing. Inmates in jails received mass immunizations and every new prisoner was vaccinated upon incarceration. The gangster kids loaded their guns and stormed hospitals, pushing everyone out of line and forcing medical personnel to vaccinate them or die. Since there was no shortage of vaccine, the medical personnel vaccinated the punks and sent them on their way so they could get back to the more deserving.

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Ray swore when the news broke. "I knew it. It was just a matter of time before those stinking terrorists used the 'poor man's atom bomb'."

"Oh calm down Ray," Stacy snapped. "Jennifer vaccinated us and we all got the flu shots. We must be protected against this virus."

"Still, I think that we'd better hole up in the shelter for a while," Ray insisted. "At least until we get news as to whether or not the flu vaccine is effective."

They took a vote. The men were all for locking down the shelter and the women were against it. However, the women decided to humor their husbands, it was a harmless enough gesture. Besides, what if they were on the off-chance right? Anyway, that was what the shelter was for, wasn't it? They also remembered Ray's discussion of that article about the poor man's atom bomb, so they battened down the hatches.

They turned out not to be in the shelter long. Ray had put in a small TV and a satellite receiver and within 3 days, CNN announced that the flu vaccine was 100% effective against the virus.

CNN also talked about the scope of the attack. The best estimates were that somewhere between 30 and 50 million Americans might die from the virus. The International Community, as a whole, locked down air and sea transport; all flights everywhere were grounded until everyone was vaccinated.

Good move, but too late. One of the terrorists had released his virus in New York City and immediately boarded a flight home. He infected most of the passengers and aircrew on the flight to Heathrow. They spread out over Europe.

His next stop was Athens and he infected the passengers on that flight, too. They spread out over the Middle East. His final destination was Tehran. Again, more passengers were infected. As it happened, there wasn't a single Russian traveler who got infected by the virus and Russia locked down tight before anyone got to their country with the virus.

The virus couldn't tell the difference between an Arab and a Turk, a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew. It was totally indiscriminate. If you were warm and breathing, it got you. Lots of people travel through Athens; it is an international air hub. People travel from Athens to all over the Med.

The Russians were pissed, just like the Mullahs thought they would be. No one in Russia had the virus, but it was taking its toll in Russian Embassies just like other Embassies. Putin called Kerry on the hotline. Millions were dead and dying in the Middle East and in Europe. What did Kerry know about this pandemic? Only that the terrorists were all Saudi students, Kerry said. Thanks Putin said and hung up.

The Russians sterilized the Middle East in a storm of nuclear fire. Not Iran or Iraq or Saudi Arabia, the entire Middle East. They killed the virus and every living soul in the whole Middle East. Anyone they missed would probably die from the virus. They launched wave after wave of missiles.

The US was keeping count of those missiles, too. After the Russians expended 172% of their admitted missile fleet, they stopped. They hadn't even used any submarine based missiles. John Kerry was seething with anger over the duplicity of the Russians and the 172% missile figure. His advisers told him that the Russians were probably finally within the missile limit provided by the treaties.

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Out in Jackson Hole, the four men were talking.

“I think that we need to come up with some kind of a plan to defend this place,” Ray stated.

“What for?” Ron asked. “One of the things that I always liked about this place was that it’s so far off the beaten path Ray,” Ron countered. “Hell, most people would have trouble finding the place with a map.”

“I hate to say it buddy,” Scott added, “But I have to agree with Ron. But, knowing you, there’s more to it than just protecting these four homes and a few head of livestock, so what do you have in mind?”

Ray looked at Michael so see if he had a comment, too. Michael just shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate that he wasn’t part of the discussion.

“I agree with you Ron, but Scott’s right, there’s more to it,” Ray replied. “Look, did any of you hear the bit on CNN about all of those prison and jail inmates getting vaccine even before some of the population?”

“I heard it, so what?” Scott said.

“I was down in the shelter listening to that radio receiver,” Ray shared. “The way I heard it was that some of those gangster kids have taken to moving on communities in a big way. Another conversation I overheard between some radio guys out in the Antelope Valley, wherever that is, was that the prisoners at the California prison in some berg named Lancaster were rioting. Apparently that prison lost a lot of their staff to the virus. They also said something about a prison in central California, Tehachapi, or someplace like that having the same problems.”

“I can straighten you out on some of that Ray,” Scott offered. “I was stationed at Edwards AFB for 4 years. Lancaster is located about 20 miles west and ten miles south of the base. Tehachapi is about 40 miles north and west of there up in the mountains. I knew about the prison at Tehachapi, but the prison in Lancaster must be new, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Apparently, California built a lot of new prisons in recent years,” Ray said. “They also mention some facility in someplace called California City.”

“Cal City is about 5 miles north of Edwards and 5 miles or so to the west, but I didn’t know they had a prison there either,” Scott shook his head.

“My point isn’t so much those particular prisons as this thing about the inmates having been vaccinated and the understaffing. How long will it be before there are breakouts from the prison system?”

“Probably not very long Ray, but what does that have to do with us?” Ron acknowledged.

“Directly, probably nothing Ron, but I’ve been thinking that we should make this place a little more secure and maybe do a little hunting,” Ray smiled.

“Hunting? Hunting what?” Ron asked.

“Why I’d guess that Ray’s talking about us doing our civic duty and hunting down escaped prisoners,” Scott laughed. “Right?”

“You read my mind,” Ray said.

“That was easy old buddy,” Scott ducked. “Yours is a short story.”

“Well, what do you say?” Ray asked.

“Are you out of your mind?” Michael could stand it no longer. “We have women to look after.”

“You haven’t been paying much attention to the shooting competition Michael,” Ray said. “In case you haven’t noticed those wives of ours can shoot circles around us.”

“I guess that’s true enough,” Michael admitted. “Do you have a plan?”

“More or less,” Ray said. “I suggest we start by making some improvised Claymore type mines. Ron has enough C-4 to make a whole lot of those and I have 3 5-gallon pails of old nuts and bolts. I know Ron is a demolitions expert and I’ve had a little training on improvised explosives.”

“Electrically activated?” Ron asked. “I have quite a few electrical detonators and I know where I can get a lot more.”

“I figured on that, Ron,” Ray said. “How much detonator wire do you have?”

“Not enough by a long shot, but that’s easy to fix.” Ron was getting interested.

“Ok, then,” Ray said. “Now either we have to think about one of us staying up at nights on guard duty’ or we have to come up with something else. Over in ‘Nam, they used ground motion sensors at times, but I doubt we could get any of those. Does anyone have any ideas?”

By this time, it was mostly the Ron and Ray show. Michael just listened and Scott started taking notes.

“We can use motion sensors,” Ron said. “My insurance company gave a discount on home insurance if the homeowner had a security system. I have a list of security companies somewhere in my papers.”

“Really?” Ray said. “Never needed any security system out here, how would we use those?”

“We have a couple of choices,” Ron replied. “I could rig them to set off the Claymores or we could get a lot of wire and put in a console. But that would have to be manned.”

“Not necessarily,” Scott chimed in. “You can forget about using motion detectors to set off the explosives, that’s a bad idea. Animals could set them off; one of the dogs could set them off; one of us could get forgetful and set them off; and, a neighbor could stop by for a cup of sugar and set them off. However, we could rig a secondary alarm to wake us up if someone tripped a sensor. Susan and I had an alarm system in Denver and those horns are really loud.”

“I don’t know about that Scott,” Ray responded. “None of us are alarms experts.”

“They sell the stuff at Radio Shack,” Scott laughed. “How hard can it be?”

“So, are we just going to protect ourselves and wait for someone to show up?” Michael asked. “I had the impression we were going hunting.”

“We are Michael, but it looks like the first hunting trip will be for the things we need,” Ray said. “We will buy, beg, borrow or steal whatever we need.”

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It took the men several day-trips to find the detonator wire, alarm wire, motion sensors and other things they needed to make the little acreage secure. The news on the satellite feed was getting better and worse. With the vaccine already in the system, the estimated death toll was being revised downward. However, having successfully bullied their way to the front of the lines in hospitals and getting their vaccinations, the gangs were getting brazen.

And, there had been a riot at Attica prison in New York and the inmates were on the loose. By the time the Governor of New York had been able to get state police to the prison; the inmates had overwhelmed the guards and were armed. The state police walked right into a hail of gunfire.

Ron got busy improvising the Claymores using the plastic explosives and nuts and bolts. He went through a couple of designs before he found one that worked really well.

Mike and Crystal and Bill had joined them at the acreage. While Ron played with his explosives, the five men strung miles of wire. Nothing fancy, just unroll it and centralize it in the shelter. The motion sensors turned out not to be too difficult to wire in.

They ran wire for the alarm horns in the small tunnels connecting the homes. There weren't a lot of sensors; they only wired the south approach to the acreage. They built a small panel with lights to indicate which sensor had been tripped. The acreage was, after all, only $\frac{1}{4}$ quarter mile square.

They had been able to buy everything they needed. Not all in Jackson, but they hadn't had to travel too far. And, they hadn't created any type of a wall of steel, either, they didn't have unlimited supplies and they figured way out in the boonies they were pretty safe.

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The Middle East was a glowing cinder; the Russians had been very thorough. The Russians had been unaffected by the virus at home. Europe was another story. There were more deaths in Europe than in the US.

There wasn't any petroleum flowing out of the Middle East either. It was still too hot for the Russians to occupy. The virus had hit the Chinese hard; the death toll in China was in the hundreds of millions. But then, the Chinese numbered in the billions and it solved their food crisis.

The North Sea oil fields cranked up their production, as did the South Americans, trying to fill the vacuum created by the loss of the oil from the Middle East. That wasn't enough and gas prices in the US went through the roof overnight.

Congress and the President reluctantly opened Alaska to more development. That was a long-term solution, but the need was far more immediate. All of the capped, inefficient oil wells were placed back into production as the price of gas continued to rise. A couple of more prisons had had riots and breakouts and the President had declared martial law, again.

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Ryan had completed IOBC and Ranger's school. Because of his excellent training record and grades, Ryan got an invite to Sapper school. This school was normally reserved for engineers specialized in demolitions. Physical training and foreign arms were also included. Ryan made top scores with the AK47. Ray had his souvenir AK47 from 'Nam and Ryan was more than familiar with the weapon.

Ryan was proving to be an excellent young officer. He wasn't blinded by the shine of the little gold bars on his shoulders. He knew well that the Army was really run, on a day-to-

day basis, by the NCOs. Guys like his father and stepfather. Ryan received his first duty assignment, 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, Company A.

Upon her return to Zaire, Jennifer was taken out of the laboratory and placed with a field hospital. She was getting training far in advance of even attending medical school. The AIDS epidemic had so strained the medical resources in Zaire that these Christian field hospitals were often all that stood between the country's population and death.

Before her six months was up, Jennifer had advanced from a nursing assistant to nursing duties, then to surgical assistant and finally even performed some minor surgery, unassisted. She was more than thankful that her year in Africa was up and that she could begin medical school. Strangely, most of Africa had been spared from the virus.

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Ryan had a fair amount of accumulated leave and when Jennifer got back to the states, they headed for Jackson Hole. As a point of reference, that was in the early summer of 2009 and the two youngsters were 23 years old. This Ryan was one squared away soldier in Ray's estimation. Lean and in perfect physical condition, the boy, make that the man, was quiet and reserved, but he knew his stuff.

Jennifer had turned into a raving beauty, too. She too was quiet and reserved. They made the perfect couple. They had a bright future in front of them. In another year, that gold bar on Ryan's shoulder would be silver. And before Jennifer was out of medical school, he would probably be a Captain.

Ryan reviewed the preparations the men had made at the acreage, pretty clever, in his opinion. He brought them news of what things were really like on the east coast. The news media wasn't telling it like it really was, he told them. The oil crunch, the open gang warfare against the population and those roving bands of prison escapees were combining to make America a very unsafe place to live.

He got Ray to dig out some of those Eagles and fixed up his and Jennifer's BOB's. He probably wouldn't need his, but he was concerned about his wife. Jennifer's BOB now included a compact Glock and a couple of extra magazines and a dozen Eagles. Before they left, Jennifer could handle the pistol very well. Yes, these two youngsters had a bright future. What is it that they say? The best laid plans of mice and men...

◦

The President had his back up against the wall. Despite having declared martial law and having imposed the dusk to dawn curfew, the violence around the country was escalating. That violence had begun to interfere with the retrofitting of the electrical grid and the water system, too. America was beginning to pay for nearly 60 years of fast living since the Second World War. It was so bad that National Guard units had to provide security for the work crews struggling to retrofit the electrical and water systems.

Rioting wasn't an everyday occurrence, but it happened with an increasing frequency. There were fuel shortages and those led to food shortages as the fuel shortages interfered with the ability of the system to get the food to the people. There had been more than one food riot when supplies had run short. The food chains were having trouble getting fuel to distribute the food from their warehouse to the grocery stores.

The curfew was being widely violated; but there was only so much the government could do. The President already had 3 Divisions of Army dispersed around the country to maintain order. He issued orders to put 3 more Divisions into the mix. That left but a single Division to defend the country against a foreign aggressor. The all-volunteer military was having its problems too and had a lot of empty positions. But, that hadn't been the President's fault, he had just signed the legislation freezing military pay and benefits, the Congress had initiated the legislation on its own.

Environmentalists were raising holy hell about the decision to open up Alaska to more oil production, too. Kerry had won the election, but now wished that he hadn't. The US was getting to be a complicated country to run.

Jennifer had completed the first year of medical school and Ryan was about to begin sporting that silver bar. Jennifer was thinking about becoming an immunologist and working for the CDC when she finished med school and her residency.

They were fit and happy but it was obvious to everyone that the long separation was wearing on both of them. They weren't having misgivings, but the strain of the forced separation while Jennifer completed medical school and Ryan completed his 5-year obligation was taking its toll. If anything, they were more in love; that was a good thing.

After Ryan and Jennifer left, the parents had a long conversation.

"These long-term commitments seem to have a way of wearing on people," Ray observed.

"Well, maybe Jennifer can get a residency closer to where Ryan is stationed," Rosemary suggested almost prayerfully.

"Maybe," Ray said, "But just about the time she does, they'll transfer Ryan to another unit and they will be separated again."

"That was the downside to the military life," Stacy admitted. "Every time Ryan and I got situated and comfortable, he'd get orders for another assignment."

"Do you think Ryan will stay in after he completes his 5-year obligation?" Ron asked.

"Probably," Ray said, "He has the makings of a career soldier."

“How about them Cubs?” Scott offered to break the tension.

“Crystal is pregnant,” Nancy said to no one in particular.

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That did it. The women split off from the men to talk about Michael Jr. and Crystal and the men turned their discussion from Ryan and Stacy to their situation in Jackson Hole at the acreage. They hadn't had any trouble so far out there in the middle of nowhere, but the trouble seemed to be fanning out from the cities.

There was already trouble in rural states like Iowa, southern Illinois and Nebraska. The trouble seemed to be converging on them in a way; it was moving east from California and west from Chicago. Denver was experiencing its share of trouble, too.

Americans' move from their economy cars back to those gas-guzzling SUVs had been a terrible mistake. But at the time, the Saudis had been flooding the US with petroleum and gas had gotten down to \$1.30 a gallon for unleaded in California. The price was now more than three times that (\$4.90/gal) and gasoline and diesel were hard to come by at times.

Ray had managed to keep the diesel tank and gasoline tanks at the acreage filled, but instead of getting the fuel at a discounted bulk price, he had been forced to pay the distributor the pump price for the fuel.

He kept the propane tank topped off too, ordering propane every time the tank was down 1,000-gallons. He had looked into producing biodiesel, but that was strictly, in his opinion, a last ditch thing; they only had 40 acres and already people were recycling the oils from the restaurants in Jackson. And, of course, they all had LP Vapor/Natural gas powered generators.

Ray was neutral on the gaseous versus diesel generator question. They already needed propane for the boilers, the hot water heaters and the stoves. They didn't run the generators except to exercise them, so maybe switching over to diesel wasn't so cost effective. Besides, it was actually easier to get propane than diesel. The world and the US had had their troubles and probably over a billion people had died, but they hadn't really gotten to a TEOTWAWKI situation as yet, at least not here in the US.

China had absorbed the deaths and moved on. The US was struggling and maybe losing the battle, but it wasn't over yet, not by a long sight. All a person could do was prepare. God, no doubt, had a lot of influence on how things turned out. But, maybe God favored the prepared. The Mormons sure seemed to believe that, now didn't they?

Russia was preparing to move on the Middle East. The radiation from their bombs was dying out and Europe and the US were deeply involved in just surviving. China was

strangely silent, too. Maybe the deaths of all those Chinese had tempered the government in China; or, maybe it hadn't.

Russia perceived the Chinese to be the real threat and positioned their boomers to attack China if that became necessary. Intelligence seemed to indicate that the Americans were having trouble fielding their military because of personnel shortages. Kerry had cut the Army to 7 divisions and the US was down to 8 Nimitz class carriers on active duty. Intelligence was less certain about the American submarines, but estimates were that a lot of them were probably holed up in port, short on crews.

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Ryan had landed wrong on a practice jump and had injured a knee. It was minor and shouldn't interfere with future jumps, but he might have to wear a brace just as insurance. Army regulations being what they were, he soon found himself being transferred to a line Infantry unit; so much for the Rangers and his illustrious career as a Ranger. But, his father had been a line Infantry NCO, and Ryan felt that was his true calling anyway.

He took the transfer in stride and carried on. At least he was a first Lieutenant now. Unfortunately, the transfer to the line Infantry unit placed Ryan in the line of fire. His new unit was one of the Divisions Kerry had activated trying to contain the disorder throughout the US.

Ray understood Ryan's frustration at being transferred out of the Rangers. The same thing had happened to him. When his knees could no longer handle the jumps, he had ended up in the 101st and in Vietnam. The US was sort of becoming like Vietnam in some ways with all of the disturbances around the country. There seemed to be a developing militia movement, too.

The President and Congress had gone too far with the new Assault Weapons Ban and people openly defied the law. The only 7 round magazines being sold were to a few liberals and to owners of M1911s. Dealers on the Internet were skirting the law by referring to their high capacity magazines as enhanced magazines.

It was a shallow ruse, but they no longer put their location information or telephone numbers on their websites and the only way you could keep up with the URL changes was to respond to their emailed advertisements within 72 hours. And, they were using so many layers of cutouts that the ATF wasn't able to track the intercepted magazine shipments back to the source. What had America become?

Jennifer was just finishing up her second year of medical school. With her experience in Africa, she was doing outstanding, too. Time was flying like an express train. They still hadn't had any trouble in Jackson Hole, maybe Ray had been right, and maybe it was the safest place in the US.

Scott and Ray made the journey down to Cheyenne one more time and bought all that they could carry. They took two pickups and two trailers and bought not only for themselves but also for Ron and Rosemary and Michael and Nancy. The Commissary didn't seem to be as well stocked this time as it had been on previous trips and had actually limited their purchases of bulk pork products. That was ok; they had a lot of chickens now on the acreage. And, as they grew older, they didn't seem to eat quite so much meat anyway.

Ammo was getting harder to come by, too. They got all that the gun store would sell them and ordered more off the Internet. They weren't increasing their ammunition supplies, just maintaining them. Those weekly practices burned up a lot of ammo, but if one didn't practice...

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They never had gone hunting in the way Ray had initially suggested. They had, in the end, contented themselves with staying at home. Everyone living on the acreage had 30 cords of wood and with their advancing ages, it got a little harder each year just replacing the wood they were burning.

They were settled into a nice, dull routine. America was becoming lawless in many ways, and was reverting to the frontier days of nearly a century before. There had been more prison breaks, even a partial breakout at the prison in Riverton.

State Police and federal troops had been rushed in and halted the breakout, but a lot of the prison population had escaped before the helicopters with the federal troops had arrived. Riverton was getting awfully close to home for them. It was only 161 road miles from Jackson to Riverton. Well, that was 200 miles from the acreage by road, but still...

Ryan had been part of the 101st Airborne unit that had been sent to Riverton by helicopter. They hadn't gotten there in time to completely prevent the breakout, and as luck would have it, Ryan had been shot. He'd taken a round to the same knee that he'd injured in the jump and his knee was all but shattered. They airlifted him out and he had ended up at Walter Reed getting his knee rebuilt

It would be a long convalescence and it would end his Army career. In the end, Ryan Williams, leader of men (and women) would not get to be a career soldier after all. He would always have a slight limp, but it wouldn't hamper him terribly in life. By the time that he had completed his convalescence Jennifer had completed medical school. She tried to find a Residency program close to Jackson, but the closest was in Denver, Co.

The NICD also had programs but none of those appealed to Jennifer. Besides, she convinced herself, Ryan needed her and she needed Ryan. They had given of themselves. It was time for them.

The US was, becoming a terrible place to live. So, after 4 years of college, a year in Africa/Atlanta and 3 years of medical school Jennifer chucked it. It was time to raise a family, but, what a horrible world to bring a baby into. Well, it was pretty safe out there on the acreage in Wyoming, so Ryan and Jennifer returned home to stay, finally.